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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THOMAS WOLFE: THE FORGOTTEN LANGUAGE

by



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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled Thomas Wolfe: The Forgotten Language, submitted by Leslie Margaret Ashcroft in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.





## ABSTRACT

"Thomas Wolfe : The Forgotten Language" is a thesis intended to provide an analytic and ultimately synthetic study of Wolfe's language and philosophy. The Introductory Chapter discusses Wolfe's definition of language, his belief in the unity of vision and language and the necessity for growth and change. Wolfe's dedication to his vocation and his concept of the creative life are noted. Finally, his creative process is discussed with indications of the structural problems this process created for Wolfe and his editors, and the textual problems it has created for the student of Wolfe.

It is the contention of this thesis that there are three basic factors influencing a writer's conscious or subconscious choice of expression from all the alternatives offered by the language: his overall vision of life; his varying authorial purpose in particular instances; and his "setting," in terms of time, place, and literary tradition. The second factor, of varying intent and resultant multiplicity of styles, has been largely ignored by Wolfean scholarship to date and is therefore the primary concern of this thesis. Accordingly, Wolfe's diction is discussed in Chapter Two, his syntax in Chapter Three, while the imagery, rhetoric and amorphous figures as extensions of diction and syntax are explored in Chapter Four. These chapters are analytic of the variations in Wolfe's style, observing as well the corresponding authorial purposes and noting the linguistic/philosophical differences which are sufficiently consistent to be considered developments.





The final chapter, "Language as Vision," concerns itself with questions of overall structure and authorial vision. Larger structural elements such as verb tense, point of view, characterization, and symbols are discussed as extensions of the stylistic tendencies and philosophical intentions noted in previous chapters, the movement being from mode of expression to mold of expression. Finally, Wolfe's "setting" is discussed as a further influence on his vision and style, reflecting his placement in geography, in time period, and in literary tradition.



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## CHAPTER I

### LANGUAGE AND THE CREATIVE LIFE

"O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door" (LHA, 1). So begins Look Homeward, Angel, and the record of Wolfe's search for the articulation of his vision. In the 1929 edition of Look Homeward, Angel, the first of Wolfe's major works, the title page read:

"Look Homeward, Angel / A Story of the Buried Life / by / Thomas Wolfe.

'At one time the earth was probably a white-hot sphere like the sun.' -- Tarr and McMurry."<sup>1</sup>

It is regrettable that later editions have dropped this quotation from an old geography text for it expresses more obviously the belief in a paradise lost than does, perhaps, the title Look Homeward, Angel from Milton's poem, "Lycidas." Just as the legendary Satanic company became dark, fallen angels, so earth has become a weary unbright cinder, and man a lost and fallen, buried creature. Intuitions of the glorious life of spiritual union remain in the heart of man, and Wolfe seeks, despite the physical limitations of his humanity, to articulate that unified vision, to find again and to open the door in the wall of





universal loneliness, to re-enter the world of spiritual brotherhood. The forgotten language, then, is the ultimate pursuit and value of Wolfe's life. Oddly enough, critics of Wolfe have been more concerned with generic type and formal structure and have confined their comments on language to ecstatic hosannahs and/or equally non-specific and vociferous denunciations. Hopefully, this thesis will fill in a vital gap in Wolfean criticism, providing an analytic and ultimately synthetic study of Wolfe's too often "forgotten language."

This thesis could have been entitled: "Thomas Wolfe: The Forgotten Style." It was not, simply because Wolfe prefers to use the term "language," a word for which he has a very definite meaning. One of the rare uses of the term "style" appears in Wolfe's "Notes from the European Tour, 1924-25" in which he says, "Manifestly, the whole course and purport of my intent is to fashion in English prose a personal and distinctive style."<sup>2</sup> Personal and distinctive, however, not because of super-imposed stylistic techniques, but because his vision was personal and distinctive. Clarification can be found in a letter to Aline Bernstein in which Wolfe writes, "However many million things and books and people there may be in the world, no one has exactly the same picture of life as I have,"<sup>3</sup> and in an earlier letter, style is established as much more than technique when Wolfe bemoans the manuscript of Look Homeward, Angel, asserting, "There is not the remote shadow of a chance that it will ever get published -- if I could write salable stuff I would: I know most of the tricks, but something takes possession of me when I write, and I weave my entrails upon the page. I can't help it: I am writing, like every sensible person, for some



audience -- but unhappily my audience has never existed."<sup>4</sup> Wolfe's articulation is not "the vehicle" or any other cliché of stylists which would depict the media as separate from the message, to paraphrase McLuhan. The language is the process of thought evolving. As Northrop Frye says, "Until the words have been found, the idea does not fully exist."<sup>5</sup> This is Wolfe's position exactly; not that he is seeking the language to give expression to a clear and comprehensive vision, but rather that the vision can only become coherent and unified when embodied in words. The connection is one of utter interdependence: the vision determines the choice of articulation which, in turn, shapes and orders the vision. Let it be clear, then, that the terms "language" and "style" as used by Wolfe, and as used throughout this thesis, refer to man's spiritual vision, universal and eternal, evolving in the physical inadequacies of words, personal and transient. Because of the physical nature of words, the physical nature of man, Wolfe's quest to articulate the spiritual is an impossibility. Philosophical acceptance of this fact on an eternal level, however, only served to intensify Wolfe's personal struggle on a day-to-day basis.

Students of Wolfe are fortunate to have his account of the writing process given fictitiously through the lives of his protagonists, Eugene Gant and George Webber, but even more fortunate to have, as well, the strictly autobiographical record of his creative struggles in The Story of a Novel (1936) and Thomas Wolfe's Purdue Speech (1937), the latter being both a recapitulation and a sequel to the earlier book. Both volumes contribute invaluable information on Wolfe's philosophical and linguistic development, his dedication to the creative life, his





creative process and the structural and textual difficulties this process occasioned.

The Story of a Novel appeared at the midpoint of Wolfe's literary career. Of his four novels, the Gant cycle of Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River had already been published, while the Webber cycle of The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again had not. In this crucial theoretical statement, Wolfe provides information basic to an understanding of the underlying philosophical beliefs and corresponding stylistic qualities of the two distinct cycles. For example, Wolfe expresses a belief that is consistent throughout his work, the belief that artists "must get from our own lives and our own experience the substance of our art which every man who ever wrote a living thing has had to get out of himself and without which he is lost" (SN, 29-30). Speaking of his earlier writing, however, he admits "that the young writer is often led through inexperience to the use of the materials of life which are, perhaps, somewhat too naked and direct for the purpose of a work of art" (SN, 21). In other words, "woven entrails" could be considered too personal and autobiographical to be artistic. In The Purdue Speech written two years later, Wolfe expands this idea, expressing similar dissatisfaction with the character of Eugene Gant, the hero of his first two novels, observing that "he had been derived not only from experience but colored a good deal by the romantic aestheticism of the period. He was, in short 'the artist' . . . -- the wounded sensitive, the extraordinary creature in conflict with his environment, with the Babbitt, the Philistine, the small town, the family" (50). Wolfe feared that this subjective, aesthetic, self-



righteous hero --- true as he was to the early phase of Wolfe's own development -- had resulted in a distorted picture of the truth. A similar observation is made by the protagonist of Wolfe's second cycle, George Webber, who calls the hero of the first book he has written, "a stick, a fool, a prig, a snob, as Dedalus was --" (YCGHA, 385), a hero who had resulted in a twisted, self-conscious vision over all. George resolves that in future if he uses himself as a character he will withhold nothing, but paint himself like everything else, honestly, the bad along with the good (385). This became Wolfe's resolve as well in turning to the Webber cycle.

The student of Wolfe must keep in mind the distinction between the author and the hero of his novels, a difficult distinction with Wolfe because his fictive creations are so undeniably autobiographical. As an example of the problem, we might consider the "Defensio Libris" written, but not used, as a prologue to Look Homeward, Angel. In it, Wolfe says, "Finally, the writer prefers to acknowledge a bond that is even stronger to him now than that of blood-kin -- that is the human one. If he belongs to any family now, it is to the tragic family of the earth to which all men belong."<sup>6</sup> The prologue was not used for the novel because as the "finally" indicates, the wisdom expressed was anterior to the book, belonging to the twenty-nine-year-old author and not to the self-centered child and adolescent of the story. In The Story of the Novel Wolfe makes a similar claim for his second novel Of Time and the River, saying it "is the story of the artist as a man and as a worker. It is the story of the artist as a man who is derived out of the common family of earth and who knows all the anguish, error





and frustration that any man alive can know" (SN, 91). The brotherhood theme is still anterior to the developmental stage of Eugene in Of Time and the River, for as Wolfe tells us elsewhere, it was during his years of laborious writing in Brooklyn, after the 1929 publication of Look Homeward, Angel and the advent of the Depression, that he saw his agony and struggles as akin to that of his suffering yet ever-valiant fellow man (SN, 60-61). Of Time and the River, on the other hand, spans only the years of Wolfe's college career as student at Harvard, teacher at New York University, writer and traveller abroad prior to 1925, prior to Wolfe's love affair with Aline Bernstein, and prior to the actual composition of even Look Homeward, Angel. Wolfe is amazingly successful in capturing the naïve perspective of young Eugene Gant. His success is due, however, to his incredible memory, and not to the fact, as so many critics appear to assume, that his development was co-existent with that of his heroes. Certain facets of philosophy and style are so pervasive in Wolfe's work because the authorial voice seeds the idea for the reader long before the protagonist discovers it.

The Story of a Novel notes a further development of the brotherhood of man concept. Following the publication of Look Homeward, Angel in 1929, Wolfe had taken a trip to Europe and had found himself extremely lonely and homesick. He tells us that from this emotion, "this constant and almost intolerable effort of memory and desire, the material and the structure of the books I now began to write were derived" (SN, 31). The perception came that, "Out of the billion forms of America, out of the savage violence and the dense complexity of all its swarming life; from the unique and single substance of this land and



life of ours, must we draw the power and energy of our own life, the articulation of our speech, the substance of our art" (SN, 91-92).

"And from the moment of that discovery, the line and purpose of my life was shaped" (SN, 35). This resolve to make the articulation of one's particular experience form the substance of one's art, and in this case, the American experience forming American art, is very clearly reflected in Of Time and the River, where the authorial voice establishes Eugene as representative of the American experience.

Wolfe had begun the practice of carrying pocket notebooks as early as 1925, a practice Reeves and Kennedy attribute to the study of Coleridge's 1795-98 notebook in Professor Lowes' class at Harvard.<sup>7</sup> Like Coleridge, Wolfe recorded snatches of conversation, personal thoughts and observations, striking scenes, a whole collage of experiences that would hopefully fuse in his imagination, forming a creative reservoir that could be tapped. Reeves and Kennedy see these notebooks as illustrative of the manner in which "Wolfe made his work superior to the usual autobiographical fiction. He selected among the details and illustrations of the life peripheral to his own and arranged them to convey the tone, the color, the richness of the American experience. The adventures of his central character are seen as only a part of a larger life. The experience, becomes, then, not personal but national, and the literary mode becomes epic."<sup>8</sup> This epic aim is felt intuitively in Look Homeward, Angel, becomes much more pronounced in Of Time and the River, along with the author's growing conviction, and is increasingly apparent in The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again, the two posthumous novels. Wolfe's scope can even be considered





universal to the extent that America of the pre-war, post-war period is representative of any or all nations at a critical stage of development. As Wolfe says, "if the work a man does is living work -- work in which his mind, his spirit, and his life are centered -- then it seems to me his work may also be a window through which one looks at the whole world" (PS, 32).

The previous quotation indicates, as well as the universality of application, the utter dedication of Wolfe to his vocation of writing. In a 1929 letter to Mrs. Roberts, Wolfe wrote: "If we muddy and cheapen the quality of our actual everyday life the taint, I believe, is bound to show up sooner or later, in what we create. . . ." <sup>9</sup> Wolfe's creative work was the very center of his existence, and therefore all other aspects of his life had to take a subordinate, supporting role. No compromises could be tolerated, for his work would then be compromised as well. Wolfe's renunciation of his family, of physical love, of fame, of Maxwell Perkins his editor, all belong to a pattern of rejection accompanied and necessitated by Wolfe's assertion of the all-important, independent creative spirit which could not accept "some part of life for the whole, some fragmentary truth or half truth for truth itself, some little personal interest for the large and all-embracing interest of mankind" (YCGHA, 262-63). It is no exaggeration, I think, to recall Milton's famous words, that "he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem, that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honorablest things. . . ." <sup>10</sup> Wolfe's Purdue Speech, appropriately subtitled "Writing and Living," and composed the



year before his death, reaffirms his life's task of writing from which he could not be diverted: "I wanted to write: I had work to do, I had writing, and still have, and I think will always have, that I wanted to get done. It meant more and it means more to me than anything else I could do" (PS, 31).

In The Story of a Novel Wolfe describes his creative process as one "that began in a whirling vortex and a creative chaos and that proceeded slowly at the expense of infinite confusion, toil, and error toward clarification and the articulation of an ordered and formal structure" (SN, 36). Wolfe uses the image of a storm cloud that builds and breaks, "pouring from its depth a torrential and ungovernable flood" (SN, 37) which carried him along. The flood, while no doubt an accurate image, can give an erroneous impression if the process of build-up prior to the storm is not properly understood. Braswell and Field tell us that "According to Edward Aswell [Wolfe's editor at Harper & Brothers] Wolfe never hesitated for a word when writing long-hand; Mrs. Campbell [Wolfe's secretary in later years] says that he was equally fluent when dictating: 'The words poured from him, and until I learned that he had worked them over in his mind for hours, even days, before he started to dictate, I was flabbergasted.'"<sup>11</sup> She might accurately have added "for years," for just as Wolfe describes his father in Look Homeward, Angel walking early in the morning, muttering and rehearsing his diatribes so that on delivery they would be flowing and polished (39), so Wolfe rehearsed in his mind, in his notebooks, in his huge ledgers and even in his letters, certain events, characters, and ideas that reappear in only slightly varying form from



his earliest writing to his last. Once the agonizing period of build-up had been undergone and the creative flood had begun, Wolfe hesitated to halt the flow. He would write himself out before stopping to reread and to revise. In the William B. Wisdom Collection of Thomas Wolfe, Wolfe's revisions on the typescripts can be seen to take the form of pencilled word substitutions or strike-outs of lines that are trite, redundant or irrelevant. What is most revealing is the scarcity of such revisions. Instead, the collection is full of variant versions of the same episode, proof that revision for Wolfe usually meant not piece-meal correction but a regeneration of creative flow and a complete rewriting.

Since everything Wolfe wrote followed roughly the chronology of his own life, he could write episodes from any period as his mood of the day dictated (Aswell, "Note," 372). Production was undoubtedly chaotic in this sense, yet the chapters and isolated scenes would gradually be linked into larger sections and so the design, the structure Wolfe spoke of would be fleshed out and eventually emerge. Wolfe's problem was invariably an excess of flesh for the chronological skeleton. He tells us in The Story of a Novel that it was under strict orders from Maxwell Perkins, his editor at Scribner's, that he finally gathered into sequential order all that he had written on the book he was tentatively calling "The October Fair" and brought it into the publishing house. "An enormous labor of revision, weaving together, shaping, and above all, cutting remained" (SN, 75). "Enormous" is the word: in the typescripts of the Wisdom Collection there are some 3000 pages that are marked as cuts from Of Time and the River, the book





which emerged and was published in 1935. Of the cutting process Wolfe says, "When a man's work has poured from him for almost five years like burning lava from a volcano, when all of it, however superfluous, has been given fire and passion by the white heat of his own creative energy, it is very difficult suddenly to become coldly surgical, ruthlessly detached" (SN, 78-79). The cuts from Look Homeward, Angel in the collection cover only ninety-seven typed leaves and come largely from the end of the book where digressions on the Pentland family and on the university had obscured the main line and characters. Although these were not all the cuts eventually made, still Look Homeward, Angel had clearly not approximated the task that the manuscript of "The October Fair" presented. In telling of the writing, Wolfe says, "I had still believed at the time of my return from Europe that I was writing a single book" (SN, 50). "It was not until more than a year had passed, when I realized finally that what I had to deal with was material which covered almost 150 years in history, demanded the action of more than 2000 characters, and would in its final design include almost every racial type and social class of American life, that I realized that even the pages of a book of 200,000 words were wholly inadequate for my purpose" (SN, 53). Fortunately, Maxwell Perkins was able to help Wolfe discern "two complete and separate cycles. The first of these was a movement which described the period of wandering and hunger in a man's youth. The second cycle described the period of greater certitude, and was dominated by the unity of a single passion . . . Although the second of the two [cycles] was by far the more finished, the first cycle [OT&R], of course, was the one which logically we ought



to complete and publish first . . ." (SN, 77). Of Time and the River, the first cycle, was accordingly worked on and finally sent to the publishers without Wolfe's permission. He was still writing and re-writing. Perkins finally took the initiative, convinced that Wolfe could rework the book forever with little improvement. Wolfe accepted Perkins' judgment that he was not cut out to be a perfectionist. He asserts, "I had twenty, thirty, almost any number of books in me, and the important thing was to get them produced and not to spend the rest of my life in perfecting one book" (SN, 86).

Wolfe believed that as a man grew and changed, so did his language. To Mrs. Roberts, his childhood teacher and long-time friend, he wrote of Look Homeward, Angel: "You are entirely right in saying that I would not write such a book twenty years from now. More than that, I would not write such a book now. One of the people in my book says that we do not live only one life -- we live a dozen or a hundred. Since I began to write this book over three years ago [OT&R] I have lived at least one. And the sad part of it is that this life including the one that is wrought out in my book [LHA] is over, finished."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in his Purdue Speech Wolfe writes that if a lost generation exists it is probably the middle-aged who have not learned to speak a new language (PS, 37). Nevertheless, the reader does not find any major linguistic difference between Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River. Both, after all, depict the romantic hero Eugene Gant in the lost and wandering phase of his youth; both recall a period of development some years removed from the present maturity of the author. Of the creative flood which produced Of Time and the River, Wolfe says



in The Story of a Novel that it has brought him "toward a rudimentary, a just-beginning, but a living apprehension of the articulation I am looking for, the language I have got to have if, as an artist, my life is to proceed and grow . . . I know the door is not yet open. I know the tongue, the speech, the language that I seek is not yet found, but I believe with all my heart that I have found the way, have made a channel, am started on my first beginning" (48-49). It should be remembered that The Story of a Novel came from a formal lecture given at a writers' conference in Colorado in 1935 after the publication of Of Time and the River. It was, in fact, a much re-written preface for the latter book and one Wolfe was dissuaded from using. That no major difference should be expected between Wolfe's first two novels is emphasized by the fact that he says he is just learning to extend relationships toward the organized, coherent articulation, the final union he seeks to bring about, and of his work to date he says, "I know that I have failed thus far in doing so, but I believe I understand pretty thoroughly just where the nature of my failure lies, and of course my deepest and most earnest hope is that the time will come when I shall not fail" (SN, 36).

An analysis of Wolfe's language should therefore be alert throughout for the stylistic growth and development he believed must occur in all men and particularly in the artist. Secondly, since Wolfe speaks, in The Story of a Novel quotation above, of having found not a "new" but a "first" beginning, the reader can logically expect a more revolutionary shift between the work published before 1935: basically Look Homeward, Angel, Of Time and the River and the collection of





short pieces entitled From Death to Morning, and the work produced in the period of "channelled" development subsequent to 1935, referred to in this thesis as the later period, which saw the posthumous publication of the two novels The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again, plus a second collection entitled The Hills Beyond. The title piece of the latter collection was intended by Wolfe to be expanded into another novel, filling in his hill ancestry which chronologically would have preceded Look Homeward, Angel of the Eugene Gant Cycle and The Web and the Rock of the George Webber cycle.

The division into early and late work is not nearly so uncomplicated as it appears on the surface, however. To begin with, from the previous quotation taken from The Story of a Novel, we know that the second cycle of greater certitude, which was to become the Webber cycle, was more complete than the Of Time and the River cycle when Wolfe first brought the manuscript to Perkins. In other words, much of The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again had been written at the same time as, and some parts even earlier than, much of Of Time and the River. Edward Aswell of Harper & Brothers confirms this in his comment on the mass of manuscript brought to him before Wolfe's western tour and unexpected death in 1938: "Some parts of the manuscript had been written as recently as four months before he died; other parts dated back to Look Homeward, Angel, and had, in fact, been cut from that book; still other parts had been written in each of the intervening years."<sup>13</sup> In addition, many of the episodes included in the posthumous publications had already been published in slightly varying form as short stories or sketches in various magazines. The student of Wolfe is faced, then,



with the task of ascertaining which episodes were written initially by Wolfe in the later period of composition, which were earlier episodes rewritten in the three intervening years between the publication of The Story of a Novel and his death, and which were earlier episodes not yet rewritten according to the more mature vision and the more controlled objective style of the later period. Chronology is some help. Many of the episodes and realizations in You Can't Go Home Again occurred in Wolfe's own life after 1935 and are therefore obviously of the later period. Aswell says of the latter novel, Wolfe's fourth, that "it was much more complete, more nearly finished. It contained more of his later writing, and even those parts of it that had been written earlier had in many instances been revised and recast in his more objective style" ("Note," 375).

The Web and the Rock presents greater difficulty. Nevertheless, we know, again from Aswell, that the love story of George Webber and Esther Jacks (Wolfe and Bernstein) which composes most of the latter half of The Web and the Rock had been written and rewritten by Wolfe over a period of years, but never to his satisfaction. His interest in "The Hills Beyond," the ancestry section, had side-tracked his intention and the proposed rewrite was never done ("Note," 374). This latter section, then, whose content picks up chronologically from the end of Of Time and the River in the Gant cycle, cannot be expected to be appreciably different in vision and style from Wolfe's first two novels. On the other hand, Wolfe's decision to abandon Eugene Gant and to begin again with a new hero, George Webber, had necessitated the writing of some three hundred pages, the first half of The Web and the Rock, recounting the early life of George and bringing his development to the point of the love affair. Undoubtedly much of George's early



life consisted of episodes Wolfe had forgotten to incorporate in the Gant cycle. Also, material cut from the first two novels was likely rewritten and incorporated. In any case, the first half of The Web and the Rock can be said, on the whole, to be in Wolfe's later manner. A final touch of inconsistency is provided by the book's European conclusion in which George attends the German Oktoberfest and is badly beaten, his body and soul becoming reconciled as a happy outcome of this bitter experience. This philosophical acceptance bears no direct relationship to the love story it follows; and, in addition, George bashes ahead in You Can't Go Home Again seemingly unaware that this reconciliation has taken place. The ending of The Web and the Rock also contains in almost verbatim form the philosophy to be expressed in the opening prose poem of You Can't Go Home Again and to be developed as the ultimate wisdom of that subsequent book. The ending of The Web and the Rock, then, can be fairly described as "forced" -- whether by Wolfe as a stop-gap measure until he could rewrite the content of the conclusion in terms consistent with the philosophical development of the hero, or by Aswell, as the best ending he could manage, charged with salvaging Harper & Brothers' investment in the pile of manuscript.

Aswell would indicate in his "Note on Thomas Wolfe," published in the third posthumous volume The Hills Beyond, that he simply followed a rough outline sent along by Wolfe. While it was necessary to delete extraneous material, to change character names and the narrative point of view in a number of instances to ensure consistency, and to write italicized bridges between chapters, still Aswell asserts that the finished product was basically Wolfe's (365-375). The two





novels, interestingly enough, were published with absolutely no mention of Aswell's editorial role, an omission that seems overly modest and that could be interpreted as downright dishonest. In the Wolfe collection there are some 1000 pages of typescript marked as rejected by Aswell in the preparation of the three posthumous volumes. This represents a considerable amount of editing. Some of the cuts are loose pages but most have been grouped in sections of some ten to thirty pages, clipped together and appropriately entitled: "Definition of the Nature of Jealousy," "The Diabetic," "The Two Trains," "The Faculty Meeting," or some other such label, indicating the highly episodic manner in which Wolfe wrote. Of the cuts he made, Aswell says, it is true of all of Wolfe's books that they "were cut, each one of them, drastically. Whole chunks and reams of them came out, and they were the better for it. I am only saying that small cutting was often impossible because it would have ruined his style. For the most part he had to be cut as he wrote -- in the large" ("Note," 364). Of both Perkins and Aswell as editors, Wolfe's friend Terry says that he "knew as almost any careful reader of Wolfe must know, that no one could hope to change Wolfe's sentences without having the changes stand out like proverbial sore thumbs. Wolfe's lines were as personal and individual as those of a poet."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Richard Kennedy in The Window of Memory would indicate that Aswell's role was much larger, particularly in the more stylistically consistent You Can't Go Home Again in which he contends Aswell actually rewrote episodes to harmonize with the language of portions more recently composed by Wolfe (403-406).



The intention here has certainly not been to untangle the textual jungle of original writing date, of possible rewriting, and of editorial contribution, but simply to sketch in Wolfe's creative process and to identify the resulting textual problems. It is obvious that linguistic changes cannot be pinpointed; water-tight conclusions cannot be drawn, concerning style. Nevertheless, certain gradual changes in Wolfe's language can be discerned, along with a more basic alteration of emphasis and concern in writing done or redone after the publication of Of Time and the River, always keeping in mind that the individual episode need not, and the overall structure of the post-humous books certainly does not possess the finish that Wolfe would have given them had he lived.

In this introductory chapter, Wolfe's definition of language/style has been given, along with his belief in the unity of style and philosophy, and his conviction that both must grow and change. Wolfe's dedication to his vocation has been noted and illustrated. Finally, Wolfe's flood-tide, episodic creative process has been discussed with indications of the structural problems this process created for Wolfe and his editors, and the textual problems it has created for the student of Wolfe. The intention has been to establish background information basic to a more analytic and intensive study of Wolfe's language and vision.



## CHAPTER II

### DICTION

"Wolfe's feeling for the colour, the music and the shape of words is extraordinary; there is no American writer to whom language in itself means so much,"<sup>1</sup> says Pamela Johnson. "In itself" is an ill-chosen qualifier, for Wolfe conceived of language as the articulation of his entire vision of life. As a vital part of that language, diction has derivative significance.

One of Wolfe's greatest stylistic strengths is his ability to create sense-oriented scenes, vivid and concrete in conception. He was well aware of his capability. In The Story of a Novel he says: "The quality of my memory is characterized, I believe, in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness" (31). As an example of this sensory power, we might choose a passage from Look Homeward, Angel, one of a sequence of passages devoted to the sense of smell:

He knew the inchoate sharp excitement of hot dandelions in young Spring grass at noon; the smell of cellars, cob-webs, and built-on secret earth; in July, of watermelons bedded in sweet hay inside a farmer's covered wagon; of cantaloupe and crated peaches; and the scent of orange rind, bitter-sweet, before a fire of coals . . . Yes, and the smell of hot daisy-fields in the morning; of melted puddling iron in a foundry; the winter smell of horse-warm stables and smoking dung; . . . of crushed mint leaves, and of a wet lilac bush; of magnolia beneath the heavy moon, of dogwood and laurel; . . . and the cool fern-smell near springs; of vanilla in cake dough; and of cloven ponderous cheeses. (69-70)





So vivid are the scents and fragrances evoked that it comes as a surprise to find only one word, "bitter-sweet," that actually attempts to describe the elusive sense of smell. Instead, Wolfe has created scenes so concrete as to season, time of day, surroundings and circumstance that the reader is transported in memory and re-experiences the sensation just as Wolfe was able to relive his experiences through his incredible memory. Precise adjectives are chosen: the cellar earth is "secret," moist, unexposed, exuding; the peaches are "crated," the scent dense but wood-filtered; the stables are "horse-warm," living, rich, manured in odor; the lilacs are "wet," a fragrance impossibly fresh, pervasive, and yes, epiphanic. Wolfe can elicit the welling, singing sensation of his own experience if the reader is receptive. While the quoted passage is bridged to cover several pages, still one can discern a thought orderliness that does not select entirely at random but runs a series on fruit or on plants, or moves from "hot" daisy-fields to "melted" iron to "horse-warm" stables.

A passage from Of Time and the River will illustrate Wolfe's appeal to a greater variety of sense impressions. Eugene is standing on the station platform of Altamont, awaiting the train that will take him from home to the new lands of the North. The "short explosive thunders of its squat funnel" (22) reach him and suddenly:

He could feel, taste, smell and see everything with an instant still intensity, the animate fixation of a vision seen instantly, fixed forever in the mind of him who sees it, and sense the clumped dusty autumn masses of the trees that bordered the tracks upon the left, and smell the thick exciting hot tarred caulking of the tracks, the dry warmth and good worn wooden smell of the powerful railway ties, and see the dull rusty red, the gaping emptiness and joy of a freight car, its rough floor whitened with soft siltings of thick flour,



drawn in upon a spur of rusty tracks behind a warehouse of raw concrete blocks, and see with sudden desolation, the warehouse flung down rawly, newly, there among the hot, humid, spermy, nameless, thick-leaved field-growth of the South. (23)

The passage is highly adjectival and basically concrete. The more impressionistic adjectives convey such emotions as excitement, familiarity, emptiness and joy, and finally, desolation, the feelings of Eugene as he balances between the departing South and the approaching North. There are no action verbs, the participial modifiers carrying any action there might have been in "gaping," "whitened," "drawn in." The monosyllabic "flung" which follows the repetition of the warehouse sounds an unexpected and harsh note. The modifiers here, although properly adjectival, are cast as the adverbs "rawly" and "newly," dissonant echoes of the manner in which the cold, stark commercial building has appeared. Commas have been used only after each completed sensation, the internal adjectives flowing without interruption. However, in the last line the inserted commas slow the pace, as do the compound modifiers, reflecting the sultry, sensually rich quality of the South. Eugene's perception has moved from near to far both physically and psychologically. The train arrives and the fixed moment passes. Most of Wolfe's description is of this impressionistic variety, in the sense that details and connotative words are carefully selected to convey the feelings of the observer rather than to give total accuracy.

A common movement in Wolfe's writing is the progression from concrete to abstract, specific to general or universal. This trend is less apparent in Look Homeward, Angel than in Of Time and the River



which shows strong evidence of Wolfe's intent to write the Great American Epic. In the latter novel, for example, Eugene on his train trip is referred to as the "Traveller," the wandering, ever-searching American. A typical sentence reads: ". . . we hurtle onward in the dark across Virginia, we hurtle onward in the darkness down a million roads, we hurtle onward driven by our hunger down the blind and brutal tunnel of ten thousand furious and kaleidoscopic days, . . . without a wall at which to thrust the shoulder of our strength, a roof to hide our nakedness, a place to build on, or a door" (35). From the literal experience of Eugene's train trip at night, the thought broadens to the similar human condition of being propelled down many different ways. Literal "dark" becomes the spiritual state of "darkness." Parallel construction and the repetition of the opening words, "we hurtle," emphasize the similarity. The third parallel expands the thought of the second. The impetus for propulsion is attributed to man's hunger, while the million different ways find juncture in the image of the brutal tunnel of time. Time, the enemy, hurtles by and man must rush desperately to satisfy his hungers in the time allotted. Dark-darkness is echoed in "blind," while frantic confusion is suggested by "furious" and "kaleidoscopic." The words have become increasingly abstract while remaining relatively clear in meaning, due to their structural adherence to the concrete opening, and to the presence of the concrete images of roads and tunnel. The sentence concludes with deceptively simple, concrete words in parallel phrases of decreasing length. The meaning, however, depends on a cumulative understanding of Wolfe's symbolism: for example, that the wall and



the roof and the building site represent, among other things, the house, the spiritual home sought by all; that just as nakedness is not a physical but rather a spiritual quality, so is strength, accounting for its seemingly illogical inversion with the word "shoulder" ("the shoulder of our strength," rather than "the strength of our shoulder"). The emphasis given "door" by the shortened rhythm and final placement is appropriate to its significance in Wolfe's symbolism as the long sought for way out of prison and way into bliss.

In "Death the Proud Brother," the same movement from concrete to abstract can be seen although the two aspects are more sharply separated. Wolfe describes at some length a young couple, well-dressed, well-educated and insolent who jest about a dying man. This is followed by a generalization of the pair to represent a new race of disillusioned, fatalistic youth: "-- a race hard, fruitless, and unwholesome, from which man's ancient bowels of mercy, grief, and wild exultant joy had been eviscerated as out of date and falsely sentimental to bright arid creatures who breathed from sullen preference an air of bitterness and hate, and hugged desolation to the bone with a hard fatality of arrogance and pride" (FDTM, 25). A carefully chosen adjective such as "bright," for creatures, links the abstraction with both the well-dressed and well-educated aspects of the literal couple. "Hard" is the only adjective repeated and it is echoed as well in the bone image. "Unwholesome" connects with the air of bitterness and hate and the fatalistic philosophy which results in arrogance and pride, sullenness and desolation. "Hugged" is an excellent choice in combination with desolation for, suggestive of love and trust, the word





emphasizes the hate and mistrust clung to by the hollow pair. Sterility is suggested by "fruitless," "arid," and even the last word "pride" which the title, "Death the Proud Brother," links with the ultimate infertility, death.

From these examples it should be evident that Wolfe selects details extremely carefully, chooses his connotative words precisely, establishes word patterns skillfully, and moves clearly from concrete to abstract. As Wolfe's books become increasingly philosophical in emphasis, there is a corresponding increase in the proportion of abstract words, passages and even chapters, such as "The Promise of America" in You Can't Go Home Again. This increase works to the detriment of characterization and incident, and to the disappointment of the reader. When three hundred pages of The Web and the Rock can cover the same ground as the fifteen hundred pages of Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River combined, it is to be expected that much of vividness and delight has been omitted along with the peripheral and repetitive.

Abstraction is also used by Wolfe for comic or satiric effect. In the following sentence, abstraction is combined with very formal diction to satirize God in conversation with fallen man: "'Since it was predestined before your birth that of your Free Will you should commit a non-existent crime of which you are incapable, I shall mete out to you the punishment that I had planned for you before you had voluntarily succumbed to the undemonstrable Evil which, in my all-seeing ignorance, I forced you to succumb to without letting Myself be conscious of it.'"<sup>2</sup> The convoluted sentence structure is a perfect



accompaniment to the muddled thought, the gobbledygook close enough to theological reality to be discomfiting.

While the narrative voice functions primarily at the informal level of diction, Wolfe frequently mixes levels to great advantage. In a typical passage Eugene imagines himself as General Gant returning victorious to his love: "With a great cry of astonishment and ecstasy she would come to him with swimming eyes and yearning arms her lovely face transfigured by that holy rapture of a pure woman ~~ready for the~~ ~~mattress.~~"<sup>3</sup> Wolfe had drawn a line through the ending and in the margin had questioned its crudity, but really the effect is delightfully funny. The sweeping rhythm comes to an abrupt conclusion; abstract becomes concrete; the nouns so painstakingly and lyrically modified end with the blunt, unmodified mattress.

One further example of diction levels will demonstrate how Wolfe uses vulgate in dialogue for purposes of characterization: "You nice, neat, eighteen-carat jewel of snobby Boston bitch! . . . So I'm a big hulking lout, am I? And that damned little affected aesthete's the finest person you ever knew! God-damn the lot of you for the cheap, lying, fakey Boston bitches that you are!" (OT&R, 788) The jewel image and "affected aesthete" indicate the education of the speaker Eugene while the profanity and repetition are indicative of his incoherent fury.

Concrete and abstract, specific and general, are terms applying basically to nouns, a part of speech used generously by Wolfe. The adjective also receives exceptional use in Wolfe's writing, exceptional both in quantity and quality. The following quotation is easily



identifiable as the language of Wolfe, here describing a dead man in a subway: "Poor, shabby, servile, fawning, snarling, and corrupted cipher, poor, meagre, cringing, contriving, cunning, drearily hopeful, and dutifully subservient little atom of the million-footed city. Poor, dismal, ugly, sterile, shabby little man --." <sup>4</sup> The passage proceeds entirely without verbs, even in the unquoted portion that follows this opening commentary. The observer is reflecting on the past existence of the dead man whose previous actions are conveyed by participles such as "fawning," "snarling," "cringing," "contriving," but even this muted action is missing from the final parallel which describes the present, lifeless condition of the man. While it would be difficult to prove that each adjective is precisely chosen, nevertheless, the total effect of each of the three statements is distinctly different. The first list speaks of a cipher, a non-entity, which has been corrupted and is described in bestial terms. "Corrupted" stands out in a series that is otherwise uniformly trochaic in rhythm. Cipher, of course, also has interesting connotations of an arithmetic, non-human world, or a coded message which must be deciphered to be meaningful. The beginning of the second statement is marked by the repetition of the adjective "poor." The cipher has become a city-dwelling atom, a minute but discrete particle of matter. The adjectives are human, this time, the picture and structure more complex, the effect not repellent but pitiful. The final parallel begins again with "poor," which has come increasingly to mean spiritual poverty. The statement is brief, returning to the trochaic rhythm of the opening, and ending emphatically with the monosyllabic "man." The progression has been





from cipher to atom to man, in death. The dead man has become a representative of the empty, the pitiful, who are elevated and unified by "Death the Proud Brother." Typical of Wolfe's style is the abstraction, the universalization, the suspended participles, as well as the repetition of the opening word in each sequence. It should be noted that the only adjectives repeated, in addition to the opening "poor," are the last two: "shabby" and "little" which have been lifted respectively from the first and second series to be included without an intervening comma as the final pronouncement.

Wolfe wrote in an unpublished review of Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms that because he was not of Hemingway's school, being given to completeness and length rather than to brevity, he was particularly impressed with the superb concision of A Farewell to Arms. Hemingway's "words not only pull their own weight in a sentence they also pull a very rich weight of profound and moving association and inference,"<sup>5</sup> he writes. In similar vein Wolfe wrote to Scribner's, admitting, "I can criticize wordiness in others but I am not always able to criticize it in myself."<sup>6</sup> It would be foolish, then, to lay a claim for Wolfe's word choice that he wisely did not make for himself. Wolfe generally achieves intensity not through rich concision but rather through accumulation that creates a dominant impression. Nevertheless, careful analysis demonstrates that Wolfe did make thoughtful selection of wording and structuring for effect, and that critics who have skimmed and discarded all such abstract and adjectival passages as redundant outpourings have done Wolfe an injustice.



A delightful example of cumulative effect, similar to the style of Dylan Thomas, is Gant's remembrance of "the unquenchable fish-filled abundance of the unfenced, blue, slow cat-slapping lazy Pacific" (LHA, 65). To write an analysis supporting "unquenchable," for example, as a superb modifier would be pedantic and ludicrous. Its effect in combination with "fish-filled" is simply to make "abundance" abundant. The commas after "unfenced" and "blue," plus the series of heavy stresses, slow the sentence which then swings into the shore-lapping rhythm of "cát-slapping/ lázy Pá/cífic." Word meaning is subordinate to the principal meaning of sound and rhythm.

Beach says of Wolfe, "He makes the most prodigal use of adjectives, and not merely simple adjectives of description, referring to specific qualities like color, texture, temperature; but still more those adjectives that are intended solely to enlarge and exalt the subject in the realm of emotion. Everything is superlative, gigantic, unique, mysterious, magical, impossible, unutterable, intolerable, and of an extreme degree of intensity, whether of beauty or terror."<sup>7</sup> We can pardon Mr. Beach his hyperbolic "everything"; he has identified three legitimate categories of adjectives that are particularly noticeable in Wolfe's earlier writing. To begin with, the perception of magnitude and uniqueness is natural to a child, and to the child-like faith Wolfe carried to his death, accounting for the continuance of hyperbolic adjectives. At the same time, Wolfe's ability to select those things that mattered most increased with maturity of vision, scope more often appearing in the sense of universality than of uniqueness in the later books. The second category of adjectives Beach mentions are those of



wonder and mystery, such as "haunting," "faery," "enchanted," "far-forested," "obscure," and "muted." These connect with images such as the tolling bell, the sea depths, the horn, and the forgotten language of the lost paradise. The third category of the "not" adjectives, like "unutterable," "unspeakable," "unknown," "insatiable," "illimitable," "unfathomable," express the cosmic, fatalistic philosophy of a Job or Ecclesiastes which accepts the limitations of fallen man. Another group of "un" words belongs to the unweaving, unspinning, unwinding pattern of reversal, returning and undoing as a means of escape. Eugene, for example, looks at the fatal, devouring, imprisoning world of his mother and her hill ancestors, and sees he must, "unweave it from his brain, distill it from his blood, unspin it from his entrails, and escape with demonic and exultant joy into his father's world, new lands and mornings and the shining city --" (W&R, 83).

An adjective such as "exultant" in the quotation above belongs to a series of joyful ecstatic words while "desolate" would exemplify a contrasting chain. There are other series connected with violence, with fear, with hunger and a score of other emotions. The opulent, sensual adjectives, for example, commonly include "luxurious," "lavish," "undulant," "silken," "sumptuous," "seductive." Any reader of Wolfe will recognize the frequency with which all such adjectives occur, as well as the fact that most of Wolfe's favorite words are polysyllabic, melodic, and of Romance origin.

Favorite phrases as well as adjectives run through Wolfe's work, like "the pellucid depths," "cataleptic trance," "brutal stupefaction," "nameless cipher," "sidereal universe," "million-footed



manswarm," and "wild goat cry," to mention but a few. Many of these phrases operate on a symbolic level and have provided many of the titles for critical works on Wolfe such as Johnson's Hungry Gulliver, Rubin's The Weather of our Youth or Walser's Enigma. Less acceptable are the exceptional words whose glaring repetition seems unintentional, the fault of a young writer who loves unusual words and does not re-read carefully enough to realize how jarring and obtrusive such repetitions can be. In this category would fall "prognathous," "inchoate," "kaleidoscopic," "phantasmagoric," "coruscating," "adyt," and a wealth of others, many medical in origin. Medicine is one of the few disciplines from which Wolfe borrowed with any frequency. There are occasional uses of technical, industrial terminology but nothing approaching the commonness of such medical mouthfuls as "cataleptic," "phlegmy," "putrescent," or "phthisic." While Wolfe's awkward use of these medical terms, in particular, cannot be defended as good writing, the use can be understood. Wolfe describes his mother and her side of the family as death-devouring; they savour and live on death just as the town of Asheville, N.C., does. The population of the health resort is dominated by the diseased and those whose occupation depends on ill-health and death. Wolfe's mother fills her rooming house with such people; his father cuts and carves tombstones until his own horrible, lingering death from cancer. Wolfe's beloved teacher Mrs. Roberts suffers from tuberculosis arrested; his soul-mate brother Ben drowns in the phlegm of pneumonia. Wolfe's letters home to his mother, to Mrs. Roberts, and to Aline Bernstein give careless indication of how often he, too, was ill. As a result, Wolfe had an obsessive loathing





for disease, in particular tuberculosis, which makes the following description of his own death most pitiful and ironic: At Johns Hopkins Hospital, "Dr. Walter Dandy, the brain surgeon, performed an exploratory operation and found Wolfe's brain covered with tubercles. He concluded that the tuberculosis lesion had reopened, that the tuberculosis germs had got into the bloodstream and been carried to the brain. Wolfe's case was hopeless. He died of tuberculosis of the brain on September 15, 1938."<sup>8</sup>

It should be clear, then, that Wolfe's word choice bears an unusually direct relationship to his own experiences and attitudes: the concrete sensory detail to his hyper-sensitive nature and fantastic memory; the abstractions and generalizations to the epic quality of his vision; the adjectival series to his impressionistic, inclusive approach; the repetitions to symbolic patternings and personal obsessions.

Wolfe generally avoided the standard clichés, in some respects creating his own; however, the inventiveness of Wolfe's diction should not be overlooked. Consider, for example, ". . . the sensual limbs of carnal whited nakedness that stir with drowsy silken warmth in the green secrecies of Lower Seven . . ." (OT&R, 75). This unit, taken from a longer sentence, has one verb, five connectives, five nouns and seven adjectives, a fairly representative distribution for a descriptive passage in Wolfe. The adjectives belong generally to the impressionistic type and to Wolfe's seductive, voluptuous series. "Sensual" is echoed in meaning by "carnal," and in sound by the series of s's strung sensuously through the passage. "Green secrecies of Lower



Seven" presses expected modifiers into noun roles, economically and effectively conjuring up an image of curtained train berths, close concealment, and tempting proximity. "Whited" nakedness was no doubt selected for its continuance of established rhythm, but in addition, as a past participle it suggests an action of "making white" and therefore of only skin-deep pseudo-purity, that the standard adjectival form "white" would not have conveyed. Then, there is the "lean farmer gangling over his reins" (LHA, 6). The participle looks both ways to describe the lanky, awkward farmer and also his driving posture. A Negro has "blubbered lips" (LHA, 62), giving both how they looked and how he spoke. Gant stares "wistful-sullenly down" (LHA, 58), oppressed by the realization of his age and the smallness of his surroundings. The adjective-adverb again plays a dual role. In "the phantom years scrolled up their vision" (LHA, 521), the noun-made-verb produces an image that is both concise and vivid. With similar concision Gant is described bellowing a wanton song as he careens "along the latticed crescent and supper-silent highways of the town" (LHA, 21). Whether such expressions can be properly termed neologisms, I doubt, but in their inventiveness they give continual pleasure to the reader. Who can resist chortling along with Eugene and his dormitory buddy, smoking and eating and carrying on "an insane symphony of laughter:

'Chuckle, chuckle! -- laugh of gloatation.'

'Tee-hee, tee-hee, tee-hee! . . . laugh of titterosity.'

'Snuh-huh, snuh-huh, snuh-huh! . . . laugh of gluttonotiousness '"

(LHA), 266). Laughter type and noun have been perfectly matched so that a gloater chuckles, a titterer tee-hees and a glutton snuh-huhs.



Another humorous passage is in Elizabethan English à la Wolfe: "'Enough of this pushpin bawdry!' said the tall stranger impatiently. 'Dost think, princock, that my drumbled belly may be fubbed off by the stale reversions of thy wit? Gramercy!'"<sup>9</sup> Sound, sentence structure and sentence type carry the meaning of the invented words. Except in fun, as here, archaisms do not generally appear in Wolfe's prose. Some of his unpublished poetic attempts, however, "speaketh," and "crieth" in all seriousness.

Hyphenated modifiers are extremely common in Wolfe's language and have accounted for many of the unusual combinations quoted previously. From the opening pages of Look Homeward, Angel one remembers the "sun-warm hens" (32), "morning-wakeful crowing" (32), "stove-red nose" (33), and "funeral-faced neighbors" (49). Two more examples will demonstrate hyphenates plus the Wolfean technique of word inversion. In three words Gant calls up an image of the women in passing carriages, their "French-olive faces window-glimmering" (LHA, 65). He also observes the "travelling man's wet chewed cigar, spit-limp on his greasy lips" (LHA, 62). The modifier behind the noun is a form of inversion Wolfe uses frequently, particularly as the beginning of a participial phrase.

The majority of examples in this chapter have been drawn from Look Homeward, Angel and other early work, not from personal prejudice but because the sensory detailing, the lists of adjectives, the unusual combinations and word inventions have largely disappeared from the posthumous work, along with the repeated "phthisic's" and "cataleptic's", a sizeable loss in diction for a small gain.



## CHAPTER III

### SYNTAX

If diction is the choice of words then syntax follows logically in discussion as the adjustment of those chosen words into an orderly, connected, harmonious arrangement. The structure of the sentence is often made synonymous with such an arrangement, but the inclusion of larger units is both valid and necessary, particularly with a stylist such as Wolfe. It is a writer's rhythmic sense in accordance with his specific purpose that governs the arrangement. As Mincoff says, "If the vocabulary represents the basic substance of style, rhythm would seem to be the most formative element, that which organizes the raw material into an effective whole."<sup>1</sup> Since all prose has some arrangement, it follows that all prose must have some form of rhythm, but the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of that rhythm depends on its accord with the thought embodied and the sound sensation it produces.

The train trip of Of Time and the River, for example, provides Wolfe with an excellent, if obvious, rhythmic opportunity: The "Click, clack, clackety-clack; . . . Hip, hop, hackety-hack; stip, step, rackety-rack" become "eat the earth, eat the earth, slam the slug and eat the earth," continuing into the boys' greetings of:

"-- Put 'er there, boy!

" . . . -- Whoop-ee! Whah-whah-h! Why, Go-d-d-dam!"

Even the lyrical passages pick up the rhythm of "streaming in the moon-





light, moonlight, moonlight," punctuated with the "WHAM! SMASH!" of a passing train and the slurred speech of the now-drunken boys, concluding with drugged, repetitive passages like ". . . low upon lowlands, and high upon hills, flowed gently sleep, smooth-sliding sleep -- sleep -- sleep" (OT&R, 69-73).

In a more subtle way, most of Wolfe's sentences follow a similar pattern of suiting sound to meaning. Consider: "The little girls trot pigtailed primly on their dutiful way to school; but the young gods loiter" (LHA, 78). The first half of the sentence does trot prissily, the "t" and "p" sounds assisting. The unusual placement of "pigtailed" after the verb is rhythmically sound and allows "primly" to modify both "pigtailed" and "trot." By contrast, the movement after the semi-colon is measured and lofty, appropriate to the god image of the young boys, intent on more important matters than school.

Wolfe's ear is excellent as one might expect of a man who thrived on all sensations. The following brief description of Wolfe's mother epitomizes her entire way of life, thanks largely to the rhythmical embodiment: "Roofing the deep tides, swinging in their embrace, rocked Eliza's life Sargassic, as when, at morning, a breath of kitchen air squirmed through her guarded crack of door, and fanned the pendant clusters of old string in floating rhythm" (LHA, 240). The rhythm of the passage does float just as Eliza does, borne along on the sea of life, patiently attuning herself to the eternal rhythms of the universe. The allusion to a particular sea, the sea-weed choked Sargasso, is appropriate because as the pendant clusters of string and the guarded stifling bedroom suggest, Eliza is a miserly collector whose life is



choked by her obsession to possess, her pursuit as implacable and relentless as the movement of the tides.

Rhythm, as the formative element, involves the ordering of individual words but also the arrangement of larger components, units of thought, which must be connected if the basically progressive, rather than recurrent, rhythm of prose is to be effected. Taking the Eliza passage above as a convenient example, we might note that the first movement is inverted. Two participial phrases begin, followed by the verb "rocked," and finally the subject "life" which the phrases modify. "Sargassic" as a proper adjective placed after the noun balances the proper adjective "Eliza" before the noun, and is given added emphasis by its placement. The second and subordinate movement, beginning "as when," is a long simile relating the focal point of the sentence, Eliza's life, to the floating string of her bedroom. Within the single subordinate clause are no less than six prepositional phrases. While Wolfe employs a variety of styles, the above example and breakdown is fairly typical of passages of narrative description and commentary. To be more specific, such passages usually employ long sentences, a high percentage of nouns and adjectives, a low verb density, and phrasal rather than clausal connectives. It is the contention of Josephine Miles that the movement over the past few centuries in both poetry and prose has been from clausal to phrasal to adjectival form, which she also calls assumptive since it flatly assumes a relationship instead of attempting to show logically that such a relationship exists.<sup>2</sup> It would seem reasonable that the phrasal, adjectival language of Wolfe, high in nouns and modifiers and low in verbs, would



tell rather than show, the reader remaining relatively passive and uninvolved. That Wolfe's narrative commentary does involve the reader is due largely, I believe, to the concreteness and specification which evoke sensations in the reader, to the participles and gerunds which convey a sense of activity, and to the rhythm which arouses reader response.

Because so many of Wolfe's sentences are lengthy, it is worth examining several more samples for the manner in which length is achieved. The following was selected as a very ordinary sentence in Look Homeward, Angel: "And as they sat there in the hot little room with its warm odor of mellowing apples, the vast winds howled down from the hills, there was a roaring in the pines, remote and demented, the bare boughs clashed" (LHA, 13). To begin with, the sentence does not give the effect of being thirty-nine words long simply because it is broken up into shorter units with clear pauses between. The opening co-ordinate conjunction "and," a favorite of Wolfe's, links this sentence to the preceding paragraph. The sole subordinate clause begins with a time conjunction, "as," and ambles, with the aid of a non-action verb and three prepositional phrases, through the description of a cosy family setting. What follows is a triad of juxtaposed principal clauses related not by logical connectives but by their unity of content in describing the fierce natural world and the wind that moves from hills to pines and boughs. Because the observers are within the house, the external world reaches them as sound. "Howled," as a verb, is more onomatopoeic than active; "was" simply links, any action being drained by the gerund "roaring," but "clashed," the last verb and the



final word of the sentence is both harsh and active. The prepositional phrases have decreased from the opening three, to one in each of the first two principal clauses. The inversion of the second principal clause and the additional pause occasioned by the placement of the adjectives after the noun, make the final four word clause, devoid of phrase, doubly emphatic. The words of the last unit are monosyllabic and heavily stressed, the b's explosive, the verb dissonant, expressing the disharmony of the world of man and the world of nature. Miles notes a general trend in modern writers to simpler, shorter sentences. Wolfe is not modern in this sense, as previous quotations will have demonstrated; however, when she speaks of juxtaposition as a twentieth century variation<sup>3</sup> she identifies a technique used frequently by Wolfe in place of standard connectives, a technique illustrated well by the last example discussed.

From all reports Wolfe's conversation was much like his writing. He was long-winded but entertaining, his speech informal, spiced with colloquialisms and the occasional expletive. He was inclined to speak to, rather than with, people.<sup>4</sup> We must take the similarity of Wolfe's conversation with his fiction on report. Wolfe's personal letters, however, are available for scrutiny and comparison. Informal, ego-centric and introspective, colorful, energetic and free-flowing, Wolfe's letters are proof that he did not adopt a "literary" style for his fictional writing, rather that the language he used in any medium was very much a part of the man. A passage from a letter written to Aline Bernstein, but never sent, will serve as an example of the similarity between the prose style of Wolfe's letters and those fictive





passages already discussed or to be discussed: "Tomorrow I will be thirty-three years old. When I met you I was twenty-five. My early youth is gone; the face and figure of the boy I was is gone, I am a gross and heavy figure of a man, and getting bald. When I met you I was penniless and obscure and filled with a proud fierce vision of the work I should do, the fame I should attain and now I am penniless and obscure again, the name I made has been forgotten, and I am eight years older, and nothing remains to me but the vision of the work I will do, the thing in me to be accomplished, and that is stronger, deeper."<sup>5</sup> What emerges most clearly from this passage is the alternation from the present to the past, including the vision of the future that is stronger and deeper than ever. The passage ends in the present where it began. Time connectives such as "tomorrow," "when," and "now" are a natural consequence of the organization by time, but even more prominent is the conjunction "and," once Wolfe has warmed to his topic. Although there are proportionately more clauses and fewer phrases in this poetic passage, the increase in verbs matters little in terms of action since they are predominately verbs of being.

A fictive passage in which "and's" are prominent begins with Eugene in the graveyard beside the fresh grave of his brother Ben: "His mind gathered itself out of the wreckage of little things: out of all that the world had shown or taught him he could remember now only the great star above the town, and the light that had swung over the hill, and the fresh sod above Ben's grave, and the wind, and far sounds and music, and Mrs. Pert" (LHA, 485-86). The "and's" here are clearly intended by Wolfe to show a fumbling mind that gathers items



without attempting to relate them. Any underlying relationship is spatial, from the sky down, and temporal, in order of perception. Although Wolfe is seeking a specific effect in this instance, the effect achieved is very like that of most of his narrative commentary, particularly in his earlier writing. The reader feels Wolfe does approach the world inclusively, bringing in, without subordinating, all the sensations and events and ideas that occur to him. The effect, apparently annoying to some readers and critics, is explainable. Wolfe, after all, is recalling an earlier period of his life and frequently identifying with a young hero who continually fumbles and grasps and doubts and questions. The style, then, is appropriate, if perhaps frustrating to the formalist who conveniently disregards the corresponding nature of the content.

To briefly summarize the matter of connectives in Wolfe's writing, one could say that the co-ordinate conjunction "and" is probably the one used with the greatest frequency. Subordinating conjunctions, when used, are most likely to be of temporal or spatial nature. The conjunctions most noticeably absent throughout Wolfe's work are those of the argumentative or logical type, classifying, sub-dividing, defining, comparing, showing cause and effect, and so on. Wolfe's method is not one of specific relationship, limitation, and refinement, but of addition, elaboration and magnification. Phrasal connectives are frequently participles or the commonest of prepositions such as "in," "at," "of," "to," "from," which are basically spatial in orientation. Connectives are often supplanted by the technique of juxtaposition, thought units being distinguished by internal commas, semi-colons, colons and dashes.



A passage from Of Time and the River that illustrates most of the syntactical characteristics discussed in the preceding paragraphs of this chapter, follows without commentary:

And Eliza, suddenly touched by that word of unaccustomed praise and tenderness, turned and rushed blindly from the room at a clumsy, bridling gait, clasping her hands together at the wrist, her weak eyes blind with tears -- shaking her head in a strong, convulsive movement, her mouth smiling a pale tremulous smile, ludicrous, touching, made unnatural by her false teeth, whispering over and over to herself, "Poor fellow! Says, 'There's no one else can cook a chicken like your mother.'" (OT&R, 256-57)

Similar passages could be found in The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again but they would not be so representative. In the post-humous novels, the sentences of the narrative description and commentary are shorter, barer, less adjectival in nature.

The ability to accelerate or decelerate within a sentence or larger unit is one possessed and exercised by Wolfe. Sentence parts are carefully chosen, thought units carefully constructed, and pauses skillfully manipulated to hasten or impede action. Eugene's description of Gant's arrival home makes use of these devices:

He sees him take the high front steps four at a time, hasten like a hurricane into the house, lay down the meat upon the kitchen table, and then without a pause or introduction comes the storm-fire, frenzy, curses, woes and lamentations, and then news out of the streets, the morning's joy, the smoking and abundant dinner. (OT&R, 59)

The first movement consists of bounding, rapid action. "And then" marks phase two, moving without pause or interruption to the staccato "storm-fire," "frenzy," and "curses," which peter out in the compound "woes and lamentations." Part three is signalled again by "and then,"



followed by the more leisurely, smoothly rhythmic conclusion, the decline to normalcy after the storm.

A unit that demonstrates effective decrease from long to short unit is the following symbolic excerpt: "He stood naked and alone in darkness, far from the lost world of the streets and faces; he stood upon the ramparts of his soul, before the lost land of himself; heard inland murmurs of lost seas, the far interior music of the horns. The last voyage, the longest, the best" (LHA, 521). The first two parallel units position Eugene between the lost external world and the equally lost internal world he has turned to face. The movement now is hastened: the subject is dropped, and then the verb is omitted. The second sentence is a fragment, serene, confident, and yet appropriately unfinished as Eugene prepares to seek the lost paradise within himself. It might be mentioned that this final fragment, "The last voyage, the longest, the best," was chosen to be engraved on Wolfe's tombstone.

A passage which moves in reverse direction from rapid to slower pace is George Webber's remembrance of a ringside adventure, watching the father of Nebraska Crane take on the Masked Marvel:

Oh, the thrill of it! The anguish and the joy of it -- the terror and the threat of it -- the dry-skinned, hot-eyed, fever-pounding pulse of it, the nerve-tight, bursting agony of it! In God's name, how could flesh endure it! And yet -- there they were, the fatal, fated, soon-to-be-at-bitter-arm's-length two of them -- and Mr. Crane as loose as ashes, as cold as a potato, patient as a dray-horse, and as excited as a bale of hay! (W&R, 50)

The sentence as an organizing unit is blurred and lost here. The pacing is accomplished by the excited exclamations, the dashes, the





hyphenated adjectives. The italics help to slow up the central portion, noting the two combattants, while the four similes complete the slow-down with their wordy structure and mundane images, as colorless as the shambling, sagging Mr. Crane.

Narration, in the sense of relating an action-packed event, requires a different type of style from Wolfe. Often, and particularly in his earlier writing, this narration is blended with much description. Forbearance is asked for the length of the passage selected, but the episode is too striking and too well-framed to be left unfinished. A shambling Southern white, backed up by a gun-toting yes-man, methodically clubs a Negro to death. As in the Mr. Crane passage previously quoted, the unit of composition is not the sentence. Instead, the rhythmic downswing of the club provides the organization:

Meanwhile, the Negro retreating slowly all the time, his terrible white stare of fear and hatred no longer fixed upon his enemy, but on the evil glint of that cylinder of blue steel behind him, his arms thrust blindly, futilely before him as his hated foe comes on, his black face, rilled and channelled first with lacings of bright red, then beaten to a bloody pulp as the club keeps smashing down with its sickening and resilient crack:

"You . . . God-damn . . . black . . . son-of-a-bitch!" the voice, high, phlegmy, choked with murder. "I'll teach ye --" Smash! the cartilage of the thick, black nose crunches and is ground to powder by the blow "-- if a God-damned Nigger can talk back to a white man!" --Smash. A flailing, horribly clumsy blow across the mouth which instantly melts into a bloody smear through which the Negro, eyes unmoving from the blue glint of the steel, mechanically spits the shattered fragments of his solid teeth -- "I'll bash in his God-damned head -- the damned black bastard -- I'll show him if he can --" Smash! Across the wooly center of the skull and now, the scalp ripped open to the base of the low forehead, the powerful figure staggering drunkenly, bending at the knees, the black head sagging, going down beneath the blows, the arms still blindly thrust before him, upon one knee now on the barren clay-baked earth, the head sunk down completely on the breast, blood over all, the kneeling figure blindly rocking, swaying with the blows, the arms still



spread out until he crashes forward on the earth, his arms outspread, face to one side and then, the final nausea of horror -- the murderous kick of the shoe into the blood-pulp of the unconscious face, and then silence, nothing to see or hear now but the heavy, choked and labored breathing of the paunch-gut man, the white rat-face behind him with the bared rat's fangs of terror, and the dull blue wink of the envenomed steel.<sup>6</sup>

"The Face of the War," from which this episode is taken, presents four separate faces, aspects, that the narrator recalls from the war years. The incident conveys action; yet, because of the quality of recollection and the aim of presenting a vignette, it emerges as action within a frozen frame. The episode is literally framed, as well: the Negro, the whiteman and the cylinder of steel mark both beginning and end. Time connectives such as "meanwhile," "then," "now," "and then" thread the incident indicating the passage of time. Action verbs like "crunches," "spits" and "crashes" combine with innumerable present participles, "staggering," "bending," "sagging," "going down," "kneeling," "rocking," "swaying," to give a present tense sense of continuous action. Yet, the frame and the remote viewpoint manage simultaneously to compress both time and action into a fixed moment.

The narrator does not directly take sides but his skillful word choice and selection of detail color our impression. The whiteman is characterized more by his high, blood-lusty voice, his profane words of hate, ignorance and bigotry, and the implied downswing of the club between his spaced-out words, than by any physical description. His venomous assistant is described in terms of a rat while the gun is never a gun but a glinting piece of steel, impressionistically described as "evil" and finally "envenomed" by its contact with the rat. The gun is mentioned three times, the club once; there is irony



in this and the fact that the Negro's eyes are rivetted to the piece of steel while his death comes not mechanically but physically from the wielded piece of harmless wood. We are not told that the Negro is heroic, or unjustly brutalized, only that he is powerful of body and that his arms are thrust blindly, futilely before him. It is his retreating, sagging, beaten body that we see, and finally a position of desperate prayer which emphasizes the merciless nature of the white, better than any words could do. Until the Negro collapses, the rhythm of the passage is punctuated by the horrendous blows, and the reader is compelled by the rhythm to be participant as well as spectator.

A similar sort of event is narrated in The Web and the Rock, again from the third person omniscient viewpoint, but the effect is quite different. A Negro, loved by the children of the town, respected by his employers, has gone mad, shot-up the community and fled, pursued by a posse:

It was Dick's last shot. He didn't miss. The bullet struck Wayne Foraker, another deputy, dead center in the forehead and killed him in his saddle. Then the posse saw the Negro aim again, and nothing happened. Dick snapped the cartridge breech open savagely, then hurled the gun away. A cheer went up. The posse came charging forward. Dick turned, stumblingly, and ran the few remaining yards that separated him from the cold and rock-bright waters of the creek.

And here he did a curious thing -- a thing that in later days was a subject of frequent and repeated speculation, a thing that no one ever wholly understood. [The second paragraph continues in slow-paced wondering fashion to describe how Dick quietly and methodically removed his shoes, placed them at his side.] . . . and then stood up like a soldier, erect, in his bare feet, and faced the mob.

The men on horseback reached him first. They rode up around him and discharged their guns into him. He fell forward in the snow, riddled with bullets. The men dismounted, turned him over on his back, and all the other men came in and riddled him. They took his lifeless body, put a rope around his neck, and hung him to a tree. Then the mob exhausted all their ammunition on the riddled carcass. (W&R, 152)



The sentences are cryptic; the verbs numerous and active; the action isolated in lock-step progression. The effect is one of horror intensified by understatement rather than by elaboration. The body is simply "riddled," it is not described in horrific detail. Both passages of narration are effective. The style of the first could be found in the later work although it would be much less representative there. Similarly, the style of the second: abrupt, bare, controlled, understated, is even less representative of the earlier writing.

Wolfe was always capable, however, of selecting just the precise words and details that would make a narrative situation come alive. Relive with Eugene, and his appropriately named friend Harry, the following episode with the hair-restorer:

"'Have you any hairs on your belly?' said Harry.

Eugene hemmed; hinted timidly at shagginess; confessed. They undid their buttons, smeared oily hands upon their bellies, and waited through rapturous days for the golden fleece" (LHA, 81). The incident is given as the briefest of sketches, yet it awakens memories and accordingly takes on extended personal associations. The fleece allusion is excellent on both the "hairy" literal level and as the figurative embodiment of the goal long-sought-after, ever-elusive.

Very frequently, as in the previous example, dialogue accompanies the description and narration of action. It provides the immediacy and involvement that the reminiscent past tense and third person narrator cannot provide. For example, Gant in his morbid moments takes to feigning death in an attempt to frighten Eliza out of her complacent indifference to his ill-health. Insanely drunk, he lies





sprawled in the hallway, son Ben kneeling beside him:

"I can't feel his heart, mama," he said, with a nervous whicker on his lips.

"Well," she said, picking her language with deliberate choosiness, "the pitcher went to the well once too often. I knew it would happen sooner or later."

Through a slotted eye he glared murderously at her. Judiciously, with placid folded hands, she studied him. Her calm eye caught the slow movement of a stealthy inhalation.

"You get his purse, son, and any papers he may have," she directed. "I'll call the undertaker."

With an infuriated scream the dead awakened.

"I thought that would bring you to," she said complacently.

He scrambled to his feet.

"You hell-hound!" he yelled. "You would drink my heart's blood. You are without mercy and without pity -- inhuman and bloody monster that you are."

"Some day," Eliza observed, "You'll cry wolf-wolf once too often." (LHA, 232)

The final delightful pun on Gant's real name, as the author's father W.O. Wolfe, rounds off the swiftly told episode.

As one of the most consistent qualities of Wolfe's style, dialogue does much more than assist narration. More than any other method of characterization, it is the dialogue that makes Wolfe's characters so vivid and memorable. Among his best creations are those just illustrated: Gant, melodramatic, fiery, rhetorical; Eliza, calm, complacent, sententious. As Richard Kennedy says, "The presence of many dialogue styles, of course, increases the stylistic variety, particularly because most of the characters are quite distinctive in the way they speak."<sup>7</sup> It is for this latter function of stylistic variety that further examples and discussion of dialogue will be given in this chapter.



"Welcome to Our City," from Wolfe's early play-writing days, shows his knack even then of capturing and maintaining different dialects, tones, attitudes, so that one immediately recognizes the speaker. However, for a play, the dialogue far outweighs any action and would have made performance tedious. A similar observation about the dialogue of Wolfe's novels is made by C. Hugh Holman: Wolfe's "works are full of accurate transcriptions of vivid speech. His characters seem sometimes to talk endlessly, but they always talk with vigor and with great distinctiveness of diction, syntax and idiom."<sup>8</sup> Wolfe acknowledged this strength and weakness. In speaking of a four-hour conversation he composed for inclusion in Of Time and the River, he says: "the nature of the talk, the living vitality and character of the language, the utter naturalness, the flood-tide river of it all was wonderful, but I had made four people talk 80,000 words -- 200 printed pages of close type in a minor scene of an enormous book, and of course, good as it was, it was all wrong and had to go" (SN, 82-83).

Wolfe's excellent ear and memory are largely, but not entirely, responsible for the calibre of his dialogue. He wrote to his mother at one point, asking her to preserve the letters his father had written, for in them was his exact conversational tone. Using these letters as a guide Wolfe was sure he could "re-create a character that will knock the hearts out of people by its reality."<sup>9</sup> In addition to letters, Wolfe's pocket notebooks, earlier mentioned, contain many records of overheard conversations, the speech patterns and accents carefully recorded to jog his memory, although the content may be only suggested. One such entry appears in PN #12, the record of a drunken



conversation among men Wolfe notes are probably salesmen come to New York for an annual meeting:

Allright -- allright -- George -- George -- lissen, George.

. . . Because I like you, Bill . . . I heard about you before I ever knew you.

Jack, Jack, draw up a chair, won't you, please.

No Bill I want to buy you a drink.

Nono, wait a, wait a, wait a, wait a minute.

I've heart a lot about you -- lissen -- Sit down -- I'm gonna buy you a drink -- allright -- allright -- lissen, sit down --<sup>10</sup>

and so on. The colloquial flavor of Wolfe's dialogue is not achieved through an actual reproduction of the content of speech, but by a careful echo of speech patterns and habits. For example, Gant arrives back in town earlier than expected from one of his health cures. Wolfe supplies the appropriate content for his mother's welcoming speech, but the structural mannerisms and tone are all hers:

I was in Garret's the other day ordering some things, some vanilla extract, soda and a pound of coffee when Aleck Carter came up to me. "Eliza," he said, "when's Mr. Gant coming back. I think I may have a job for him?" "Why, Aleck," I said, "I don't much expect him before the first of April." Well sir, what do you know -- I had no sooner got out in the street -- I suppose I must have been thinking of something else, because I remember Emma Aldrich came by and hollered to me and I didn't think to answer her until she had gone on by, so I called out just as big as you please to her "Emma!" -- the thing flashed over me all of a sudden -- I was just as sure of it as I'm standing here -- "What do you think? Mr. Gant's on his way back home." (LHA, 64)

The countless thought interruptions, the lack of sentence structure, the continuous flow, the obsession with irrelevant details such as the items purchased, the exact quotations of others and her own precise



words, the clichéd and homey expressions, the superstitious overtones -- all of this is Eliza's interminable way of saying, "I sensed you were coming home." Unfortunately, Eliza's speech is so vivid, her habits so pronounced, that when Wolfe tries to transfer her quality to another character, as he does to Delia in "The Web of Earth," or to Aunt Maw in the George Webber cycle, the reader can only think, "My God, it's Eliza!" Similarly, Eugene-George-narrator Wolfe share echoes of the paternal rhetoric that would show Wolfe's close identification with his heroes even if there were no wealth of other clues to do so.

Fadiman writes a hilarious parody of Wolfe entitled, "The Wolfe at the Door." In it, dialogue is one of the stylistic qualities that is spoofed: "'Phuh! Phuh!' howled Uncle Habbakuk, the goat-cry welling up like a madness out of the vine of his throat. 'Phuh! Phuh! Ow -- ooh! Beep!'" (455) Fadiman exaggerates, yet like all good parody it is reasonably close to reality. Sister Helen snickers K-k-k-k-k at the slightest provocation and strokes her large chin, or, true daughter of W.O., she will launch into a martyred lament; "'My God, does it always have to be this way? . . . Can I never have a moment's happiness? . . . Must they always come to me? Does everything have to be put on my shoulders?'" (OT&R, 13) Brother Luke stutters richly: "'W-w-w-well, Papa, . . . Wy-wy-wy-wy, I f'ought we'd just c-c-c-come by for a m-m-m-moment to let Gene say g-g-good-bye to you" (OT&R, 84). Still, Wolfe gets away with dialogue that would seem ludicrous in any other context but that of the vivid and believable characters he has created.

Wolfe's gift extends far beyond his family members. Esther Jacks, for example, (Wolfe's lover, Aline Bernstein) speaks with the





simplicity, the good humor, energy and animation that are hers. Recalling with delight her Uncle Bob, she says: "'One night he took me to the opera, I must have been about sixteen, and God! I felt so proud to be with him! It was one of those operas of Wagner's, and you know how everybody gets killed in them, and we were coming up the aisle just before the end and Uncle Bob came booming out, 'They're all dead except the orchestra!'" (W&R, 367) The exclamations, the increased pace and flow as she warms to the punch line, the mimicking of her Uncle Bob -- all these are Esther.

Before leaving the topic of style variation through dialogue, brief mention must be given to Wolfe's excellent ear for dialects. "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn," for example, is narrated entirely in tough Brooklynese. Says the native: "'Jesus! I've t'ought about dat guy a t'ousand times since den an' wondered what evah happened to 'm goin' out to look at Bensonhoist because he liked duh name!'" (FDTM, 97) Or there is the upper crust New Yorker who decides to cultivate George Webber, the writer. Wolfe mimicks: "'I love you, Jawge,' she leaned over and whispered loudly in her rather whiskified voice. 'I love you -- but mah love for you is power!' She looked at him with a soulful expression. 'You, Jawge -- I love you for your maind,' she rumbled on, 'for your spirit! But Miguel! Miguel! --' here her eyes roved over the Cuban as he sat tucking the food away with both hands -- 'Miguel -- I love him for his bawd--y!'" (YCGHA, 347) A Negro porter says, "'Don't you think you's somp'n dough! . . . Git dat ugly ole livah-lipped face o' yo'n out o' my way!'" (OT&R, 409) An Englishman remarks, "'I caun't see that it makes the slightest difference.



It's not as if it mattuhed any longah!" (OT&R, 604) The Jewish accent is echoed with, "' . . . the wateh in the pitchehs was frozen hahd; an' she has the nuhve to ask me if it's cold!" (OT&R, 117) while the Frenchman who approaches George in Paris, says, "'Mais parfaitement! Monsieur, . . . permettez-moi . . . I am an attaché -- vous comprenez -- of ze theatre. I shall buy for you ze tick-et.'" But, worries George, will he be too late for the show? "'Du tout, du tout, du tout, du tout, du tout! The representation has not yet commenced. So of time you will have plen-tee'" (W&R, 642). With the odd foreign word, a different construction, minor and unobtrusive spelling changes, Wolfe is able to communicate with consummate skill the desired dialect.

The stream-of-consciousness technique, as a further variety of syntactical arrangement, should have followed naturally for a writer who could capture the verbal free association of a conversationalist like Eliza. However, it is a technique Wolfe used with only varying degrees of success. A good passage results in Look Homeward, Angel when Gant and Eugene return home from a movie, each lost in his own thoughts. Eugene is imagining a romantic incident in which he is the "Stranger," the "Ghost." He goes through several false starts:

Came a day when Spring put forth her blossoms on the earth again. No, no -- not that. Then all grew dark. Picture of a trampled lily on the earth. That means he bigged her. Art. Filled her with thee a baby fair. You can't go away now. Why? Because -- because -- her eyes dropped shyly, a slow flush mantled her cheek. He stared at her blankly for a moment, then his puzzled gaze -- (O good!) -- fell to the tiny object she was fingering nervously, with dawning comprehension," (225-26) and so on.

Wolfe doesn't attempt to tell all of Eugene's thoughts -- he simply picks the highlights that will allow the reader to follow the imagined



incident. The single word "Art," for example, reminds the reader that "he bigged her" would be friend Art's crude explanation, while the euphemistic phrase that follows would be Eugene's romantic interpretation of the pregnancy. Another example is Chapter 49 of The Web and the Rock, entitled "Dark October," and devoted to the thoughts of Esther. On the whole, the chapter is too organized, too complete, too well articulated to simulate the flow of thought. This, however, is a minor flaw that does not really occur to the reader when the thoughts seem genuinely Esther's. The major fault is that the thoughts, the images, the rhythm, are occasionally Wolfe's, as in: "Strange time, forever lost, forever flowing like the river! Lost time, lost people, and lost love -- forever lost! . . . Now in the dark I hear the passing of dark time, and all the sad and secret flowing of my life. All of my thoughts are flowing like the river, all of my life is passing like the river, I dream and talk and feel just like the river as it flows by me, by me, by me, to the sea" (W&R, 682). While Wolfe's dialogue rarely lapses in this way, the attempt to capture the thought rhythms of another person too often leads to an identification and a usurpation of those thoughts and rhythms by his own, resulting in an unconvincing and unsuccessful use of the stream-of-consciousness technique.

A further style of syntactical arrangement belongs to Wolfe's abstract passages. In Look Homeward, Angel these are usually brief, and closely attached to a concrete experience. For example, Chapter 16 is devoted to a description of the Leonards (the Roberts of Wolfe's life), their background and marriage, and the manner in which Eugene came to be chosen for their private school. This chapter ends:



In the cruel volcano of the boy's mind, the little brier moths of his idolatry wavered in to their strange marriage and were consumed. One by one the merciless years reaped down his gods and captains. What had lived up to hope? What had withstood the scourge of growth and memory? Why had the gold become so dim? All of his life, it seemed, his blazing loyalties began with men and ended with images; the life he leaned on melted below his weight, and looking down, he saw he clasped a statue; but enduring, a victorious reality amid his shadow-haunted heart, she remained, who first had touched his blinded eyes with light, who nested his hooded houseless soul. She remained. (179)

The passage relates directly to the content of the dozen pages preceding and leads into Chapter 17 which describes the four years Eugene spent at Leonard's school and, in particular, the importance of Margaret Leonard to his life. In addition to this pointed inter-relationship, there are concrete images that give life to the abstract passage. For example, the metaphor of the idolatrous moths that are consumed in the Leonard's marriage is picked up again in the reference to Mrs. Roberts as light-giving. The "cruel volcano of the boy's mind" is similarly continued in "blazing loyalties" and lives that "melt" below his weight. The living men who become mere "images" and "statues" in his clasp connect with his "shadow-haunted" heart.

The movement of the abstract passage is logical, from the present situation to a series of questions, to an account of the fate of his gods in the past, and then, signalled by the contrasting conjunction "but," to the resolution of his questions and hopes in the person of Mrs. Roberts. The inverted word order of the clauses referring to Mrs. Roberts give her spiritual role elevation, while the contrast in length of the last two sentences, from sixty to two, is most effective, emphasizing the repeated words: "She remained."





Abstract passages, such as the above, which are relevant in content and imaginative in style, are an asset to Wolfe's writing. While both strong and weak abstract passages can be found in all Wolfe's work, certain trends can be discerned. In Of Time and the River the epic universalization, mentioned previously in the chapter on diction, causes the abstractions to increase in frequency and in length. In the latter book, to some extent, and in both The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again, philosophical essays on such themes as loneliness, fame, love, the promise of America, appear. A sound practice of newspapers is to keep advertising in contact with newscopy, for an entire page of ads is unlikely to be read. Wolfe too often ignores this journalistic practice, divorcing his lengthy abstractions from concrete stimuli and thereby tempting the reader to skim, particularly if he is familiar with Wolfe's style and can recognize the approach of Wolfean clichés.

By contrast with the passage from Look Homeward, Angel, and as illustration of what has just been said concerning abstraction, we might consider this excerpt from The Web and the Rock. It is part of a four page philosophical jag set off by an unfortunate encounter between George and four ruffians:

Similarly, if the grey and humid skies of desolation pressed down upon your spirit; if the broad, wet lights of shame were eating nakedly into your unhoused, unwallled, unprotected flesh; if the nameless and intolerable fear -- huge, soft, grey, and shapeless -- was pressing at you from the immense and planetary vacancies of timeless skies; if grey horror drowned you, and every sinew, power, exultant strength and soaring music of your life, together with the powerful, delicate and unaccountable fabric of the nerves lay snarled, palsied, and unedged, leaving you stricken, wrecked, impotent, and shuddering in the hideous shipwreck of your energies:



then you could expect the sneering horde of evil-loving, life-destroyers to appear (W&R, 46). There are images here as well, for example the desolation and fear that press down upon the spirit, but they are not nearly so concrete, nor as interrelated as those in the Look Homeward Angel passage, except in the sense of being uniformly oppressive and debilitating. There is little stylistic variation here, the series becoming obtrusive and monotonous. In addition, the utter wreckage described seems disproportionate with the childish humiliation suffered three pages prior.

While You Can't Go Home Again has abstract passages of both the strong and weak variety exemplified, it also has an increasing number of abstractions embodied in quite a different style. For example, there now appears a very mundane, down-home, colloquial form of philosophizing: "There is something good in the way people welcome success, or anything -- no matter what -- that is stamped with the markings of success. It is not an ugly thing, really. People love success because to most of them it means happiness, and whatever form it takes, it is the image of what they, in their hearts, would like to be. This is more true in America than anywhere else" (YCGHA, 125). The inversions, the high-powered vocabulary, the rolling rhetoric, the intensity, frequently disappear in Wolfe's later work, perhaps as a result of his perception that his philosophy was more simple and grass-roots than mystic and esoteric; perhaps, too, because he was increasingly interested in telling his audience his own critical standards, not fashionably Jamesian.



There are certainly abstract passages, particularly in You Can't Go Home Again, which could accurately be described as doctrinal: "We must look, and with our eyes see, the central core of defeat and shame and failure which we have wrought in the lives of even the least of these, our brothers. And why must we look? Because we must probe to the bottom of our collective wound. As men, as Americans, we can no longer cringe away and lie" (YCGHA, 328-29). The passage rings with brotherly conviction and resolution; the tone is declamatory, oratorical; the question is not voiced in doubt or confusion but as a rhetorical ploy, an entrée for the answer. In terms of sentence type variation in Wolfe's writing, this observation can be made: Wolfe employs all the sentence types to advantage; however, as his beliefs become clearer and his certainty grows, the interrogative sentence is used less frequently as a legitimate question, and imperatives become more common. Wolfe's imperatives, it should be noted, are not of the "you (understood)" variety; he includes himself as one who must act, and his subject, accordingly, is "we."

The Biblical tone, suggested by the "even the least of these, our brothers" in the previous quotation, becomes more and more pronounced in Wolfe's later writing. By the end of You Can't Go Home Again, the language of the philosophical passages could be described as aphoristic and prophetic. Evidence the following passage taken from Chapter 47 "Ecclesiasticus" where Wolfe mentions the rigid beliefs of his college days. This dogged adherence, he says, "was wrong, because the essence of belief is doubt, the essence of reality is questioning. The essence of Time is Flow, not Fix. The essence of faith



is the knowledge that all flows and that everything must change. The growing man is Man-Alive, and his 'philosophy' must grow, must flow, with him" (YGCHA, 731-32). While accepting that his own "Credo," Chapter 48, is necessarily provisional, subject to further growth and change, Wolfe, nevertheless, feels that for the first time he can clearly formulate his beliefs and state them plainly (YCGHA, 739). To some readers a clear formulation, however provisional, may come as a relief; others may wish, as I do, that his vision had remained "inarticulate," the elusive spiritual truth which he pursued intensely but never captured. "Inarticulated," his vision was haunted and romantic; "articulated," it is disappointingly obvious and ordinary.

It is important to draw one final distinction, that is not commonly made, between Wolfe's abstract passages and his so-called "poetic" ones. The term "poetic" is somewhat specious, particularly at a time when the two "forms" of prose and poetry are prone to overlap. Nevertheless, "poetic" is a term employed by critics, and is perhaps valid if one imagines a literary continuum with poetic at one end and prosaic at the other, and then conceives of all writing as ranging between these two poles. "Poetic" would then be connected with writing that approaches regularity of metre, that is more emotional than intellectual in origin and appeal, more subjective than objective, more imaginative and connotative than literal and denotative, more concise than expansive, more concrete and specific than abstract and general. "Prosaic" would refer to writing that more nearly approached the converse qualities as given above.





By such a measure, most of Wolfe's abstract passages would not qualify as particularly "poetic" writing. The more rhetorical and elaborate utterances are frequently too vague and generalized, too long-winded, and unfortunately often too unimaginative, despite the fact that they are emotional and rhythmic. Other abstract passages, while more concise, lack the imagery and emotional appeal of the truly poetic, and so the qualifications go. Wolfe's symbolic passages, the prose poems beginning Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River, for example, and their many echoes, do qualify as more poetic passages; however, these will be reserved until Chapter Five and the discussion of symbolism.

The following description of Germany, however, would also fit my conception of poetic prose. It appears in a letter to Aline Bernstein in 1926, and is written without strike-outs or additions in a beautiful flow of words: "Below old dreaming towers a river runs; upon the rocks the Lorelei comb their hair; the winds about the castle crags at night are full of demon voices; and the gabled houses of the toyland towns are full of rich and gluttonous warmth."<sup>11</sup> It is a concise and concrete picture; it is imaginative, subjective and emotional in appeal both because of its connotative word choice and its strong rhythm. A critic like Saintsbury would find the rhythm most distasteful. He speaks of loosely metred verse which is unsuitable in prose writing since prose rhythm should be as varied as possible, and progressive, a leading rather than completed rhythm.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly, what Saintsbury says is basically true of prose, but he is too dogmatic and categorical. Good rhythm is surely that which contributes to the



desired effect and is appropriate to the passage as a whole. Accordingly, prose rhythm may be very prosaic or very poetic depending on the writer's particular content and purpose. The description of Germany is given a consistent rhythm to create a mystic, hypnotic, fairyland effect, the effect Germany had on Wolfe, and it is precisely right in this instance. At the same time, Saintsbury is correct in believing that continuous rhythmic regularity in prose will result in monotony and annoying obtrusion.<sup>13</sup> Wolfe's abstract passages are occasionally guilty on this score.

Poets have long been given greater liberty in the matter of word order because of their supposedly more creative and imaginative endeavor, and also as a concession to the demands of rhythm and rhyme. As a result, word order inverted from the normal Subject-Verb-Object/Complement also strikes the reading public as "poetic." Two of the four rhythmic statements in the description of Germany are inverted. The syntactical device of inversion is one Wolfe used frequently for effect, particularly in the earlier period of his writing. The single word inversion has already been illustrated, with adjectives in particular being given great mobility. Another very simple example of inversion is Wolfe's, "So ran the summer by" (LHA, 22). Any other arrangement of the words, such as, "So the summer ran by," destroys the regular iambic rhythm. Or again, of Gant returning from California and surveying the town, Wolfe writes: "How looked the home-earth then to Gant the Far-Wanderer?" (LHA, 58) The inversion again is partly for rhythmic purposes but primarily to capitalize on the "poetic" elevated reputation of inversion and to transfer this romantic, heroic quality



to Gant, a quality sustained in the Gulliver-stance from which Wolfe has him view his surroundings.

"Up on the mountain, down in the valley, deep, deep in the hill, Ben -- cold, cold, cold" (OT&R, 53), is the sort of sentence for which Wolfe is ridiculed by some critics. In defense, it can be said that the poetic ordering is appropriate, for the death of Wolfe's brother is an occurrence made highly significant whenever it is introduced by Wolfe. Secondly, although the sentence is repeated elsewhere in varying forms, it first appears as Eugene leaves Altamont. The phrases, "up on the mountain," "down in the valley," "deep in the hill," which could be considered trite and unoriginal, are, in fact, the literal path back to Altamont and Ben's grave, a path just traversed by Eugene's north-bound train. From the single word Wolfe progresses to an emphatic double use in "deep, deep," and the rhythm increases with the trebling of "cold." The chill is intensified with each iteration, and could imply any number of things: the icy recollection by Eugene, the coldness of death itself, the indifference of the world. The recollection is very emotional; its utterance is therefore very rhythmic, and the combined result is more poetic. Few prose writers have the emotional intensity, and hence the poetic quality of Thomas Wolfe.



## CHAPTER IV

### IMAGERY, RHETORIC, AND AMORPHOUS FIGURES

For organizational purposes this chapter has been divided into three rather hypothetical sections: the first dealing with imagery and those imaginative figures which seem most logically to be extensions of diction; the second involving the rhetorical figures which seem to extend most naturally from syntactical patterning; the third collecting those amorphous qualities which are dependent on both diction and syntax for their effect. This division is admittedly artificial, much overlap occurring among the various figures, but such an organization at least provides a systematic approach to what can otherwise become a very involved and digressive topic.

#### 1

#### Imagery

Imagery is a term which is so meaningful, that for all practical purposes it has become meaningless. Vague references seem to identify it with the visual sense, with vivid picture-creating. Other uses make it synonymous with figurative language, and in particular with the figures of the simile and metaphor. In this thesis, the term imagery will be used, as I believe it was originally intended, as a





semantic relative of the word imagination, having the same connotations of creativity and originality. At the same time, image refers to a specific, discrete instance of this creativity, and results more from word choice than from syntactical patterning of a larger unit. Imagery refers to a number of such images, but is still much narrower in scope, more specific and concrete than the terms imaginative or imagination, referring to the abstract mental capability.

Various examples have been given in earlier chapters of Wolfe's imaginative and often startling use of adjectives. Some of the effects he achieves result from the figure of speech known as synesthesia, where one sensation is described in terms of another. For instance, Wolfe categorizes German architecture as "gutteral Victorian" (W&R, 653), using sound to modify sight and convey an image of order and propriety that is also rich and massive. Gant and his aged cronies gather to gossip and Wolfe remarks, "their huddled bawdry exploded in cracked high wheezes on the Square" (LHA, 218). "Bawdry" as a vocal term might be loud or ribald, but the visual adjective "huddled" strikes the reader as unexpected and most effective. We are given the Square as locale; age is conveyed by the "cracked high wheezes" of the men, while "huddled bawdry" gives an excellent image of the group bent in a circle, whispering dirty jokes or off-color remarks that result in out-bursts of mirth, periodically exploding the resilient huddle.

A third example of synesthesia is the effective opening sentence of Look Homeward, Angel which speaks of the miraculous destiny that could lead from Epsom into Pennsylvania and finally to Altamont,



"over the proud coral cry of the cock and the soft stone smile of an angel . . ." (LHA,3). As one reads on, it becomes clear that the cock reference is to Eugene's grandfather who lived dangerously for a while travelling and pitting his fierce fighting cocks against those of the local farmers. The stone angel reference is to Eugene's father whose desire was to wreak out in stone the head of an angel. On a figurative level, the compound phrase establishes the paternal legacy of an obscure and passionate hunger which will drive Eugene (George/Wolfe) as well. Synesthesia is to be found in the modifiers "coral" and "stone" which both fit into patterns of alliteration, as well. "Coral" adds many connotations: the red color of the rooster's comb; the dawn when his crow goes up; the blood-lust of the fighting cock and of his owner; even, perhaps, the call of distant lands, exotic coral islands and dangerous coral reefs. "Stone" properly modifies the literal carved angel whose smile appears to be soft. Placed instead as a modifier for "smile," "stone" works with "soft" to produce an oxymoron. The smile becomes deceptive, and the angel is left nebulous: perhaps only a tangible carved image, perhaps something real and living although intangible.

Alliteration, as it appeared in the previous example, results from a deliberate word choice that seeks a particular sound effect. The harsh "c" sounds of "coral cry . . . cock" approximate the strident crowing of the rooster. The "s's" of the "soft stone smile" are smooth, provocative, in this instance leading man on to an impossible hope. The same consonants are used by Wolfe in describing Eugene's Brooklyn room as "one huge gigantic Stink, a symphonic Smell, a vast



organ-note of stupefying odor, cunningly contrived, compacted and composted of eighty-seven separate, several putrefactions."<sup>1</sup> The capitalization of Stink and Smell in connection with the metaphors of symphony and organ-note suggest the title of some grand opus. Because the composition is one of odors, the elevated images are humorous. Similarly, the intended effect of the alliteration here is largely comic. The c's, and the s's that follow, force the reader to pause between words, emphasizing the number of ingredients, eighty-seven after all, that have gone into this astounding composition. "Composted" is a particularly apt choice, connecting as it does with Stink, odor and putrefactions.

"S" appears to be a favorite sound for Wolfe. At another point he speaks with disgust of the "snuff-mouthed bony women, and tobacco-jawed men, sprawled stupidly in the sun-stench of their rude wide-boarded porches" (LHA, 80). The slowness and lethargy connoted by "sprawled" and "sun" are modified by the narrator's harsh additions of "stupidly" and "stench." While alliteration is often associated with the pleasant, musical sounds of euphony, Wolfe is equally capable of employing the device for cacophonous effect. Take, as a further example, his description of shack town's pregnant women, their bellies protruding "like some dropsical ripeness foully fructifying in the sun" (W&W, 58). "Dropsical" suggests an unhealthy overswollen state; in this instance, over-ripe and downright diseased, as the adverb "foully" suggests. However, it is the sound of the description, more than the meaning, that prescribes the ugliness Wolfe wishes us to see and the repugnance he wishes us to feel.



As one might expect, Wolfe uses assonance, as well, often to the extent of becoming internal rhyme. An earlier quotation on Wolfe's use of "and's" depicted Eugene at a grave site, fumbling for meaning. In the same situation, still fumbling, Eugene plays with word sounds in his search for a key: "It was October but the leaves were shaking. A star was shaking. A light was waking. Wind was quaking. The star was far. The night, the light. The light was bright" (LHA, 486). The rhyming continues, but ends up where this brief excerpt does, with the illumination that over us all is a light, that the end is not darkness. The idea is one Wolfe mulled over frequently: it appears as a poem in the autobiographical sketch written in preparation for Look Homeward, Angel, and also in the pocket notebooks.

The train trip in Of Time and the River, earlier quoted as an instance of heavy rhythm, also contains rhyme. As Wolfe says: the wheels of the train "give a rhyme to madness, a tongue to hunger and desire, a certitude to all the savage, drunken and exultant fury" (69), indicating that Wolfe saw rhyme as a means to order, to articulation, and to conviction, a function it served in the graveyard passage, as well. "Rock, reel, smash and swerve; hit it, hit it, on the curve; steady, steady, does the trick, keep hêr steady as a stick; eat the earth, eat the earth, slam and slug and beat the earth, and let her whir-r, and let her pur-r, at eighty per-r!" (OT&R, 69) The train's answer, Wolfe's wisdom, and ultimately Eugene's, is to hurtle exuberantly, perhaps violently, but constantly through time, living on the earth but triumphing over it. The train image is so important throughout Wolfe's work precisely because it does parallel his philosophy of





man's passage through life. The train chapter in Of Time and the River appropriately shifts to a different vowel sound, long "e" and the lulling "oo" as, the evening ended, the land lies "dreaming in the moonlight, beaming in the moonlight, to be seeming to be beaming in the moonlight moonlight moonlight oonlight oonlight oonlight oonlight." The hypnotic sound and rhythm are the meaning. "And Virginia lay dreaming in the moon" (72).

In a passage from The Web and the Rock Wolfe uses rhyming sounds to express the child-like jubilation, the transport of George and Esther's love. George sings out: "'I am astounded and confounded and dumbfounded at you, woman!'

'He is astonished and admonished and demolished and abolished!' she cried.

'You missed that time, it doesn't rhyme!'" (W&R, 446) And so the love play goes, quite convincingly I feel. A rhyming passage in You Can't Go Home Again, however, misses the mark. Foxhall Edwards, says the narrator, "was none of your little franky-panky, seldesey-weldesey, cowley-wowley, tatesy-watesy, hicksy-picksy, wilsony-pilsony, jolasy-wolasy, steiny-weiny, goldy-woldy, sneer-puss fellows" (485). While Wolfe undoubtedly intended the childish effect to reflect on those people named, the fact that they were people he personally disliked and that the rant is irrelevant to the discussion of the Fox's qualities, make Wolfe appear the childish one.

The use of onomatopoeia also belongs in a discussion of sound effects. For example, Wolfe writes that out in the forest: "The tongue-trilling chirrs arose now, and little brainless cries, liquefied



lutings" (W&R, 89). "Chirrs" is the most properly onomatopoeic word, but Wolfe uses alliteration and context to make "tongue-trilling" and "liquefied lutings" function as sounds, as well, and not as mere descriptions. Some of Wolfe's invented words appear as sound imitations; for example, the "skreeking jerk" (LHA, 59) of the train, which is a jerkier word than the more conventional "screeching." Wolfe also describes the coast "at which the sea forever was working in the moon's light wink, with glut and coil, with hissing surge, with lapse and reluctance of its breath, feathering eternally at the million pockets of the land" (W&R, 609). "Glut" and "hissing" are onomatopoeic and so is "lapse," if read as a pun on the lapping sound and motion of the tides. In addition, the rhythm of the sea is established in the three phrases beginning "with" and is broken, not so much by the comma as by the word "feathering," whose initial strong stress shatters the iambic flow. Wolfe's various techniques of sound, such as alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme and onomatopoeia are often found in conjunction with heavy rhythm, contributing to the "poetic" effect which is stronger in Wolfe's earlier writing and less pronounced in his later period of composition.

The pun, as word play that depends on sound, might be mentioned at this point. It should not be surprising that a writer so conscious of words should capitalize on their ambiguity. In poem fragments in the manuscripts we find examples such as:

Stillwell is sick -- that good old man  
We ne'er shall see him more

Are you still sick, Stillwell.<sup>2</sup>



Or in his pocket notebooks: "The position of women -- Occasionally on the bed, often in the kitchen."<sup>3</sup> A portion of manuscript cut from Look Homeward, Angel contains a cynical description of a woman pregnant for the fifth time, "announcing the seasonal consummation of lover's bitter mystery . . . The short and simple <sup>uals</sup> ~~annals~~ (sic) of the poor."<sup>4</sup> Wolfe has put a question mark in the margin, apparently questioning how obvious he needs to make the pun.

The pun is also used in its crudest and most obvious form to characterize the Pentland family of Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe's maternal relatives. They refer to W.O. Gant as "L.E. Gant" (12); they ask him about juries because they understand he has done a lot of courtin' (13), and so on. Wolfe as narrator, and a true son of his mother, cannot resist the pun either. He describes Professor Hatcher's "arty" drama class and remarks, "False, trivial, glib, dishonest, empty, without substance, lacking faith -- is it any wonder that among Professor Hatcher's young men few birds sang?" (OT&R, 135) Or, there is the description of fat Jerry Alsop with "his belly buttoned in blue serge" (W&R, 33). Of the home town upset over Webber's book, the narrator in You Can't Go Home Again says: "They, of course, had not read Ulysses. And Webber had not read people" (326).

Some of the more important names in Wolfe's books were apparently chosen with an eye for double meaning. "Gant," for example, must remind the reader of the word "gaunt"; to be sure this connection is made, Wolfe tells us his English grandfather changed his name from Gaunt to Gant when he came to America (LHA, 3). As a substitute for "Wolfe," the surname has the same "lean and hungry" connotations



of yon Cassius. The Gaunt-Gant pun is utilized frequently: for example, to describe the father's "gaunt earth-devouring stride."<sup>5</sup> Also, when Gant, ill and unhappy, leaves the ruins of his first marriage and turns westward to a new life, the narrator says: "The eyes of the gaunt spectre darkened again, as they had in his youth" (LHA, 5). The gaunt spectre literally describes the thin, diseased frame of W.O. Gant, but figuratively it refers to the ghostly hunger that haunts the Gants and drives them on. Similarly, PN #33 makes clear the choice of "Webber" as a substitute for the Gant name. Written in are the words: "The Web of the Weaver's Weft, the Years Which the Weaver Hath Spun" and so on, and beneath this, the names "Webber," "Weber," "Weaver."<sup>6</sup> The idea, of course, with the suffix "-er" meaning "one who," is to make the hero "one who weaves or creates webs," just as all men do in the course of their lives. Aunt Maw, as the replacement for Eliza in the Webber cycle, is another example of the pun. She functions as George's mother (maw) but she is also the yawning, engulfing pit of memories that Eliza was. Wolfe undoubtedly chose the name "Eugene" because it means "well born" and he could draw the distinction, as he does in Look Homeward, Angel, between being "well born" and "well bred" (29). Wolfe errs with the pun, however, when he names his publishers in The Web and the Rock Rawng and Wright (Chap. 32), implying with his reversal of "r" and "w" that they similarly reverse wrong and right. He errs, because the effect is comic and obtrusive while the episode is clearly to be regarded as a realistic and tormenting one for George.

Finally, even a book title such as From Death to Morning seems to me a case of punning. Wolfe's point is that death does not





lead to "mourning" but to "morning," a new dawn and a new life.

"Night" and "Life" become part of the title, too, simply by the yoking of their respective partners, "Death" and "Morning." As I have hopefully demonstrated, the possibility of a pun, whether for comic or serious effect, should not be ignored when reading Wolfe.

Finally, we come to the comparison figures of speech most commonly identified with the term imagery. Since the writer may choose his objects of comparison from the huge scope the world provides, his choice reveals his areas of interest, his patterns of concern, his very personal view of the world. For this reason, the study of a writer's choice of comparisons can be most valuable.

The simile tends to be a less startling form of comparison than the metaphor, since it realistically acknowledges a mere "as if" or "like" situation. It is a longer form, normally naming both objects and the point of comparison while the metaphor commonly omits one of these elements. The simile, therefore, is more obvious in meaning and demands less of the reader. Wolfe uses the simile infrequently; still, its presence is worth noting if only for the light it casts on Wolfe's preference for metaphor.

After Eliza of Look Homeward, Angel delivers one of her tortuous speeches, the narrator comments: "Her memory moved over the ocean-bed of event like a great octopus, blindly but completely feeling its way over every seacave, rill and estuary, focussed on all she had done, felt and thought, with sucking Pentlandian intentness" (LHA, 65-65). The metaphorical form of this image appears earlier in the book when Gant is maddened by Eliza's "white pursed face, and all



the slow octopal movements of her temper. . . ." (LHA, 15). While the simile is the more detailed and specific form, it also limits interpretation as the open-ended metaphor does not.

A second simile, which shifts and grows, uses many familiar Wolfean images such as the prison, darkness and the light. Wolfe is describing Eugene and Mrs. Roberts:

He turned his face up to her as a prisoner who recovers light, as a man long pent in darkness who bathes himself in the great pool of dawn, as a blind man who feels upon his eyes the white core and essence of immutable brightness. His body drank in her great light as a famished castaway the rain: he closed his eyes and let the great light bathe him, and when he opened them again, he saw that her own were luminous and wet. (LHA, 178)

Eugene is likened to a prisoner, one in darkness, a blind man, a thirsty castaway, and she to light, dawn, immutable brightness and rain. While the similes shift somewhat, particularly in the castaway image, unity is maintained by using water terms throughout, such as "pool" of dawn, the actions of bathing and drinking, and the final description of Mrs. Roberts' eyes as wet and luminous, a shining combination of light and moisture.

A simile taken from The Web and the Rock revolves around the topic of nature and seasonal growth, another favorite of Wolfe's:

And, between the old red brick of two blank walls a slender tree, leaved with the poignant, piercing green of late April, looked over the boarding of the fence, and its loveliness among all the violence of the street, the mortared harshness of its steel and stone, was like a song, a triumph, and a prophecy -- proud, lovely, slender, sudden, trembling -- and like a cry with its strange music of man's bitter brevity upon the everlasting and immortal earth. (W&R, 575)



The visual loveliness is likened to sound: first, to a jubilant series of "song," "triumph," and "prophecy," modified by a number of adjectives that include the unexpected "slender" and finally "trembling," both modifiers preparing us for the second simile which likens the loveliness to a cry for man's transient and mortal state. The dual awareness is very typical of Wolfe's tragic yet optimistic view of life. The opening description of the "poignant, piercing green of late April" conveys much the same message as the two similes. Both adjectives are examples of synesthesia: "poignant" normally referring to sensations of taste or smell although applicable here in its broader sense of touching or moving. Its connotation of painful sharpness is picked up by the second adjective "piercing," and both are like the sharp cry for man's bitter brevity. The green of spring is the prophetic triumphant song, for the seasons give victory over death. Philosophically consistent in Wolfe is the belief that beauty exists not despite approaching death, but because of it, as a valiant affirmation of life.

The adjective "mortared" in the previous quotation is indicative of another area Wolfe drew on for his comparisons. The word suggests plaster, cementing together the brick and stone of the city, but the reference to the "violence" of the street also implies the alternative meaning of a weapon for firing shells. A simile in You Can't Go Home Again also uses the imagery of war-time to describe a boom town of the 1920's, saying: "It looked like a battlefield, cratered and shell-torn with savage explosions of brick, cement, and harsh new stucco" (145).



Some of Wolfe's similes are "tired" and conventional: for example, when the fire occurs at the Jack's Party (YCGHA) the fire hose is likened to a boa constrictor (300) and the crowd to driven cattle (303). While most of Wolfe's similes are vivid, the infrequency of the figure suggests that it was uncongenial to his nature, perhaps too rational, precise and limiting a form. It is not unusual to find his similes shifting into metaphors as his preference for the latter form exerts itself. The scene of the drunks coming to the polls to vote against prohibition, for example, is a humorous one. Wolfe describes the men "glancing, like surrounded knights, for an embattled brother, [while] the church women of the town, bent like huntresses above the straining leash, gave the word to the eager children of the Sunday schools. Dressed all in white, and clutching firmly in their small hands the tiny stems of American Flags, the pigmies, monstrous as only children can be when they become the witless mouths of slogans and crusades, charged hungrily, uttering their small shrill cries, upon their Gulliver" (LHA, 234). As a result, the alcoholics are "deltaed in foaming eddies of innocence" (235). The two opening similes establish the drunks as crusading knights under attack, the church women as vicious packleaders: showing very clearly Wolfe's bias in the matter. Metaphor takes over, but the images are maintained, the children becoming both pigmy attackers, charging their Gulliver, and hungry, yapping hounds unleashed. The final metaphor of the delta does not jar the reader because the triangular image connects with the fighting formation of the alcoholics wedging their way to the polls, while the "foaming eddies of innocence" remind us again that the





attackers are Sunday school children surrounding, yapping, lapping at the men.

Muller says of Wolfe, "Habitually he wrote in metaphor rather than simile -- not, like modern poets, because he was deliberately aiming at condensation or ambiguity, but because he immediately saw and felt in this way."<sup>7</sup> It seems to me that metaphor does not work with likeness and similarity so much as with limited identification. The metaphorical mind relates and identifies what are often very minor characteristics, making relevant the seemingly irrelevant. The process is not one of total fusion for much of the effect of the metaphor depends on the recognition of the disparity, as well. For example, Eugene leaves the house at dawn to do his paper route: "Staggering blindly in the whitewashed glare, his eyes, sleep corded opened slowly as he was born anew, umbilically cut, from darkness" (LHA, 224). Heavy lids, eyes corded with sleep, connect in Wolfe's quick mind with the umbilical cord of birth. Leaving the dark house and opening the eyes become identified with exit from the dark womb and naked entry to a glaring world of awakened activity. The metaphor is striking because it is imaginative and original, seeing a relevant relationship in what would appear to most as widely disparate situations. Wolfe plays on this perception of disparity for comic effect, as well. In a burlesque of the Old West, romantic Eugene imagines a saloon girl he has just rescued from dishonor. She beams at him and "Two dimples sentinelled a platoon of milk-white teeth" (LHA, 227). We laugh, with Wolfe, at the incongruity, for relevancy has not been established convincingly; the military and romantic spheres still seem hopelessly irrelevant.



Some of Wolfe's best metaphors are his most condensed. For example, the "cricketing stitch of noon" (OT&R, 58) appears several times in slightly varying form. Condensation is achieved by making an adjective of the noun "cricket," the combination with "stitch" suggesting the rapid measured sound threading the midday. Another apt image is the "rusty scuffle" of wind-driven dead souls (OT&R, 52), indicting modern man with a charge of spiritual inactivity and the suggestion of corrosive accumulation through indifference: in connection with "wind-driven" and the suggestion of dead leaves in the fall, "rusty" refers to the autumnal coloring of the lifeless and fallen leaves/souls. "Scuffle" implies the confused and ignominious earth-bound flight of such souls. Another repeated image is Gant's "lion-ramp of morning" (OT&R, 29), connoting his kingly role in the family as well as, perhaps, the dominance of animal over spiritual drives in his nature. We recall his roared invectives that functioned as tirade for Eliza and reveille for the children, and his storming rampages through the house. Then, there is the horrible description of the eyes of the choking Starwick which roll "with the wooden, weighted movement of a doll's" (OT&R, 779), lifeless while yet alive, or the shudder effect description of the dying Gant ". . . consumed and honeycombed by the great plant of the cancer which flowered from his entrails and had now spread its fibrous roots to every tissue of his life" (OT&R, 78). "Honeycombed" as a verb suggests the undermining progress of the disease as it eats its way through the body; on a more literal level, the honeycomb as a waxen structure of hollow cells is also apropos, for this is all that remains of Gant. The flower image with its profuse



bloom and life-sapping roots is startling and incongruent, a metaphysical conceit, yet it is consistent with the translucent purity and beauty Eugene sees in his diseased father, an affirmation, again drawn from nature, of new life through death. Elsewhere Wolfe speaks of spilling his entrails on the page when he wrote. It is significant that he chooses these same vital organs as the focus of his father's illness, indicating that Gant had allowed his inner life and vitality to rot and grow diseased.

In another description of Gant's ill-health, the narrator states that "his body as it sickened distilled a green bile of hatred against her crescent health" (LHA, 232), "her" being his wife Eliza. There is a suggestion here of self-poisoning through hate, a theme that is common in Wolfe's writing. One may remember the gun, in an earlier quotation, that was envenomed by its contact with a hate-filled rat-like clerk. "Distilled" suggests a drop by drop exuding of Gant's hatred, but also connects with alcoholism as one of the fleshly excesses contributing to his ill health. "Crescent" suggests that Eliza's health is waxing as his wanes. The moon is brought to mind with its connotations of darkness, mystery, superstition and natural rhythm, all connotations common to descriptions of Eliza.

A relationship fundamental to the world of nature, that of light with life, is not particularly original or imaginative. Frequently, however, Wolfe is able to give unique twists to his expression of the light-life idea. Gant, for example, is described as death-in-life, hanging "to life by a decayed filament, a corpse lit by infrequent flares of consciousness" (LHA, 504). The reference to his body



as a corpse underlines the death-in-life idea, and functions as an appositive for the image of the decayed filament whose light/life is fitful and infrequent.

The mechanistic age is frequently attacked by Wolfe, not in the sense of opposition to industrialization and progress, but rather to the valuation of mechanism above humanity. So, in Of Time and the River the man-made train hurtles past the station crowd ". . . drawing the souls out through their mouths with the God-head of its instant absoluteness, and leaving them there, emptied, frightened, fixed forever, a cluster of huddled figures, a bough of small white staring faces, upturned, silent and submissive, small lonely and afraid" (OT&R, 23). Thus, the awed and timorous reverence of dispirited man for his own mechanical creation is vividly captured by Wolfe, although the faces as clusters of white blossoms on a bough is perhaps too reminiscent of Pound's famous subway image.

Wolfe makes the point that the city, a man-made web, is often falsely regarded, too. As illustration there is his description of dry, meagre, calloused city-dweller Abraham Jones, a description which is followed by the questions: "What earth had nourished him? Had he been born and grown there among the asphalt lilies and the pavement wheat? What corn was growing from the cobblestones? Or was there never a cry of earth up through the beaten and unyielding cement of the street?" (CT&R, 458) The natural set next to the artificial compares the two to the detriment of the man-made. Yet the answer comes that just as the immortal and attentive earth waits beneath the city streets so Abraham Jones beneath his man-swarm atom exterior is living man.





Again, we have Wolfe's use of the natural world to affirm a lesson of life.

Wolfe does draw heavily on natural images for many of his philosophical beliefs. As illustrated in the previous quotation, nature shows him the permanence, the immortality that underlies transience and mortality. Esther's seemingly ageless face is invariably likened by the narrator Wolfe to a flower; for example, her "fresh, jolly, noon-day face of flowerful health and purity and joy" (W&R, 550). But there are two sides to nature: the ugly as well as the beautiful, the painful as well as the pleasurable. It is from this dual perspective that Wolfe writes to his love, Aline: "You are the most precious thing in my life, but you are imprisoned in a jungle of thorns, and I can not come near you without bleeding."<sup>8</sup> If nature teaches duality, it also demonstrates that as with one, so with many -- the universal being reflected in the particular. In addition, nature is associated by Wolfe with unconscious habitual actions, humans frequently being likened to animals in this regard. More often, the comparison to nature and particularly to the animal kingdom is derogatory, as with the nameless cipher who cringed and snarled. Wolfe also makes frequent use of the natural scene to harmonize with the mood he is establishing or to trigger a response in himself. The green of April, for example, can always be counted on for a rhapsodic moment.

However, while metaphors relating man to the natural world are common, personification, as a form of metaphor comparing the non-human to the human, is surprisingly rare. The process does not work in reverse: nature is not human. Unlike many of the Romantics, Wolfe



does not see all creation as one. Man is distinct from the rest of creation by virtue of being half-spirit as well as half-animal. For Wolfe, man is this earth's primary being and his primary concern.

A final group of images deserving of mention are those connected with sex. The narrator of Look Homeward, Angel, for instance, describes the sexual arousal of the aging Gant in graphic terms as a man dying of thirst: "A slow trickle of lust crawled painfully down the parched gulley of desire, and ended in dry fumbling lechery" (LHA, 236). One basic drive is defined in terms of another, but age and spiritual decay have made the drive futile and unnatural. Equally impotent and unnatural is the "sensitively obscure and artistic youth, who pined above the tea cups of aesthetic women, expiring with pale languor the limp lily of his energy into an embrace of jade earrings and exquisite yearnings" (W&R, 551). The metaphors entirely disembody the pseudo-artistic/aesthetic two-some. Sexuality and artistic creativity are frequently equated by Wolfe; here, the pining youth performs with "pale languor" and "limp lily" the act of creation. "Expiring" is a superb substitute for a more energetic word such as "ejecting;" the former suggests nothing more active than a breathing out; secondly, a connotation of expiry in the sense of running out, becoming null and void; thirdly, a connotation of dying, most apt and yet paradoxical in this supposedly "life-giving" circumstance.

Wolfe's relationship with Aline Bernstein at a crucial period in his artistic career, during the writing of his first book Look Homeward, Angel, no doubt has bearing on his sexual imagery and its linkage with artistic creativity. On the one hand, he could see Aline



as an asset to his art, telling him of her childhood in the city, recalling for him a foreign way of life, introducing him to the wealthy art-conscious city world, encouraging and disciplining his writing, nurturing his body and providing the security and joy of love he so badly needed. On the other hand, he could see her world as corrupt and contaminating, her care as possessive and stifling, her love as sterile and devouring. She was forty; he, twenty-five when they met, and his letters as well as his novels show he feared that he was only one of a line of youthful lovers to feed her ego and to bolster her failing youth. By the time Wolfe was ready to incorporate the love-story into his novels, enough years had elapsed to permit a clearer perspective. In The Web and the Rock, Wolfe describes his veering relationship with Aline but labels the negative, paranoid perspective as Webber's mad and distorted vision, his feverish imagination, and so this perception does seem to one reading the Wolfe-Bernstein letters of this period. Aline does emerge as vain, possessive, demanding, martyred, and hysterical on occasion, but her imagination, child-like enthusiasm, optimism, nobility and unfailing love are also obvious.

It is in one of Webber's "mad" moods that the following passage of sexual imagery occurs. He has generalized Esther into a regiment of Jewish women: arrogant, opulent, lavishly beautiful, glowing, melting, "the living rack on which the trembling backs of all their Christian lovers had been broken, the living cross on which the flesh and marrow of Christian men had been crucified. And they were more lost than all the men whom they had drowned within the sea-gulf of their passion, their flesh more tormented than the flesh of all the men



whose lives had been nailed upon their lust, and whose wrung loins hung dry and lifeless like a withered stalk from the living wall of their desire" (W&R, 547-48). The women are associated with instruments of torture: "the living rack," "the living cross," "the living wall of their desires," while the men are left broken, crucified, dry and lifeless. The Jewish-Christian relationship was, of course, Wolfe's own experience, representative here of a sterile union since Gentiles can properly be only diversions, peripheral loves for the insatiable Jewish women. At the same time Wolfe sees these victimizers as more lost and tormented than their victims. Although Wolfe never directly connects his feelings for his mother and for Aline, images such as the sea-gulf and drowning one in this quoted passage are used in describing both women and his relationship with them, the imagery conveying a link of which Wolfe may not have been consciously aware.

Greatly extended, sustained comparisons are not common in Wolfe's writing. Nevertheless, examples do exist, a particularly fine instance exploring further the sexual question. Eugene has delivered a lecture to his English class and his complete exhaustion is likened to:

the weariness a man has after a great burst of love with a potent and adored mistress -- the back was drawn in, half-broken toward his trembling, wrung, depleted loins, his limbs faltered, his fingers shook, his breath came heavily, his body respired slowly in a state of languorous exhaustion, but where the weariness of triumphant love brings to a man a sense of completion, victory and finality, the weariness of the class brought to him only a feeling of sterility and despair, a damnable and unresting exacerbation and weariness of spirit, a sense of having yielded up and lost irrevocably into the sponge-like and





withdrawing maws of their [the students'] dark, oily and insatiate hunger, their oriental and parasitic gluttony, all of the rare and priceless energies of creation. (OT&R, 477-78)

We are given triumphant exhaustion with a potent and adored mistress and then the reverse reaction with a sterile class. The students are described in terms of yawning, parasitic female organs, devouring, non-productive recipients of his creative energies. The comparison grows as Wolfe's quick mind develops an analogy with a fish he once caught which had fastened to its brain "some blind horror of the sea, a headless, brainless mouth, a blind suck and sea-crawl, a mindless abomination glued implacably, fastened in a fatal suck in one small rim of bloody foam against the brain-cage of the great dying fish" (478). Through the analogy the sexual drain has become again, as in the literal lecture situation, a brain drain, the class sucking and living on his mental energies as the blind sea-crawl lived on the dying fish. The analogy brings in again the imagery Wolfe uses consciously or subconsciously to describe his mother and his Jewish mistress.

The analogy appears occasionally in Wolfe's writing. His memory continually dredged up events corresponding to present stimuli, but the past and the present were more likely to be tightly connected in the metaphor than in the form of an analogy, which acknowledges a parallel rather than declares a limited identity. Like the extended comparison, the analogy encourages an exhaustive pursuit of parallels and requires a sustained precision of wording, qualities not generally to be found in the free-wheeling Wolfean style. George Webber's impression of the South in The Web and the Rock is given in an uncom-



plicated analogy that is worth quoting as an example composed in Wolfe's more concise and ordered later style. George thinks over the Civil War and its aftermath:

. . . the whole dark picture of those decades of defeat and darkness. He saw an old house, set far back from the travelled highway, and many passed along that road, and the troops went by, the dust rose, and the war was over. And no one passed along that road again. He saw an old man go along the path, away from the road, into the house; and the path was overgrown with grass and weeds, with thorny tangle, and with underbrush until the path was lost. And no one ever used that path again. And the man who went into that house never came out of it again. And the house stayed on. It shone faintly through that tangled growth like its own ruined spectre, its doors and windows black as eyeless sockets. That was the South. (W&R, 245)

The reader is reminded perhaps of Stephen Crane's parable-like poems. Through this brief analogous story, Wolfe has depicted the South of the past as traditional, non-progressive, isolationist, ruined, deathly, haunted and blind.

The analogy with its similarity to the extended comparison and also its persuasive function as a technique of rhetoric will serve as a bridge into section two of this chapter.



### Rhetorical Figures

Northrop Frye gives one of the most reasonable definitions of rhetoric as self-conscious communication, the social aspect of the use of language, which is aware of an audience and is therefore concerned with appealing particularly to the emotions and imagination.<sup>9</sup> As a result, rhetoric is more rhythmic and can take either of the two forms of conventional rhythm: the recurrence of rhythm and sound which is verse, or the syntactical relationship of subject and predicate which is prose.<sup>10</sup>

The deliberate word choice of Chapter Two and the imagery discussed in the first section of this chapter both make a deliberate appeal to the emotions and imagination and are undeniably a part of rhetorical persuasion. At the same time, rhythmical patterning, as Frye suggests, is the largest factor in rhetoric. The more regular and repetitive that patterning, the more verse-like the rhetorical effect. Wolfe's prose is considered highly rhetorical, highly verse-like, then, for a variety of reasons: first, its connotative wording (Chap. II) and abundant imagery (Chap. IV, Sec. 1); secondly, its frequent use of poetic inversion; thirdly, and most importantly, its pronounced use of rhetorical devices such as parallelism and repetition which heighten the sense of rhythmic regularity and recurrence. The overall effect does tend to be one of heightened emotion, elaboration and eloquence more commonly associated with poetry. It is in this sense that Wolfe can be discussed legitimately as a rhetorician. However, if rhetoric



is taken to mean ornamentation, superficial trickery and insincerity, as so many moderns apparently interpret the term, then Wolfe has no place in such a discussion.

The use of rhetoric came as naturally to Wolfe as breathing. He tells us in his Story of a Novel, as well as fictitiously in Look Homeward, Angel, that his father was a man who loved rhetorical poetry, and it was this poetry Wolfe heard and learned as a child (SN, 5). We know that the rhetorical rant of the father in Look Homeward, Angel is copied from the conversational tone of Wolfe's own father and that this, along with interminable ramblings and colloquialized recollections of his mother, constituted his early linguistic environment. The extravagant, oratorical flavor of Southern speech, in general, would have been an influence on his language, as well as the Northern dialects and European languages he encountered, and the extensive reading which he did. Kazin, while noting the Southern influence in the language of Wolfe as well as in Faulkner's, feels that the indiscriminate vitality, the power and scope are part of an American rhetoric which "goes back to Whitman, to Melville, to the creators of the great mass myths of Davy Crockett and Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed and Mike Fink."<sup>11</sup> Richard Kennedy assures us that Wolfe spoke as rhetorically as he wrote,<sup>12</sup> and Wolfe's personal letters are additional proof that the rhetoric was not an ornamental gloss added to his fictive writing but an intrinsic part of the man and his vision.

Wolfe's fondness for parallelism contributes substantially to the rhetorical nature of his writing. He finds an astonishing number of varied uses for the figure. For example, the opening paragraph of





Chapter 9 in Look Homeward, Angel is one long periodic sentence composed of four parallel sections separated by semi-colons, each of these sections being composed of smaller parallels as well:

Yes, and in that month when Proserpine comes back, and Ceres' dead heart rekindles, when all the woods are a tender smoky blur, and birds no bigger than a budding leaf dart through the singing trees, and when odorous tar comes spongy in the streets, and boys roll balls of it upon their tongues, and they are lumpy with tops and agated marbles; and there is blasting thunder in the night, and the waking million-footed rain, and one looks out at morning on a stormy sky, a broken wrack of cloud; and when the mountain boy brings water to his kinsmen laying fence, and as the wind snakes through the grasses hears far in the valley below the long wail of the whistle, and the faint clangor of a bell; and the blue great cup of the hills seems closer, nearer, for he has heard an inarticulate promise: he has been pierced by Spring, that sharp knife. (LHA, 78)

Periodic sentences are not common in Wolfe's writing. The effect he seeks is not generally one of suspense or elaborate surprise. Normally a description such as the above would begin with the statement of Spring's arrival and then be followed by the varying scenes of concrete detail. Even in the example given, Wolfe's opening allusions to Proserpine and Ceres do identify Spring at the outset. Parallelism is perhaps not so pronounced in this first example because the items and sections vary in length and are not signalled consistently by repeated words; the variety is appropriate for Wolfe is depicting spring as abundantly various.

A second example of parallelism, taken from a letter written by Wolfe to his friend Henry T. Volkening, is more pronounced in rhythm as Wolfe berates the affected, diffident pseudo-intellectuals of the day: "Unplatitudinously they utter platitudes, with complete unoriginality they are original. Whenever they say something new you



wonder where you heard it before, you believe you have not heard it before, you are sure you have heard it forever, you are tired of it before it is uttered, the stink of a horrible weariness is on it, it is like the smell of the subway after rush hours. . . ."<sup>13</sup> Here, the parallel statements are balanced, accenting the choppy rhythm of the run-on sentences. Many of the words are repeated, drawing attention to the parallel structure and to the paradoxical meanings. Here, Wolfe wishes to suggest the weary similarity of all that the "moderns" say.

Another example of even greater balance and precision appears in a letter to Aline Bernstein written in 1931 when their relationship was extremely strained: "Aline, be my friend, as I am yours; love me dearly, as I love you; be sane and honest, and strong as I have tried to make myself alone in exile; and be beautiful and lovely and good as you alone on this whole earth can be."<sup>14</sup> The passage is made up of four imperatives: the first two closely parallel, as are the last two with their triad of adjectives. In the first three requests, Wolfe asks Aline to be like him, but in the last he speaks of her unique qualities; "alone" is a key word, for with reference to Wolfe it means his solitary existence while its repetition in reference to Aline means she "only." The passage is a lyrical and eloquent appeal, intense and convincing, proof that rhetoric need not be, nor appear to be, insincere.

Wolfe also demonstrates an ability to progress in the parallel structure, rather than to reiterate and expand emptily. An example of progressing parallelism revolves about the theme of the inadequacy



of human utterance to express "the wild joy swelling to a music in our heart, the wild pain swelling to a strong ache in our throat, the wild cry mounting to a madness in our brain. . ." (OT&R, 34). Within the frame of the heavy beat, the repetition of "wild" and the similar verbals, lies a thoughtful crescendo from joy to pain to the audible cry, music to ache to madness, and heart to throat to brain. Critics are far too prone to flippantly dismiss such passages as "tidal surges of rhetoric" or "apocalyptic delirium."<sup>15</sup>

Parallels, emphasizing basic similarity, are often effectively used by Wolfe to indicate more subtle points of contrast as in the following parallel of the city and the university: "By night, the hard and sterile lights of their glittering, barren obscene streets fell lividly over the pale and swarthy faces of a million rats of the flesh, and by day, in the weary and hatred-laden air of the university, the harsh and merciless light shone on the venomous faces of the rats of the spirit" (OT&R, 422). Here is a pessimistic denunciation of both worlds, but the university light is a probing, relentless inquisitor not a series of crass, flashing promoters. The university faces show mental viciousness not physical crudity, and waste comes at the expense of spirit not of flesh.

Another passage in which the effect is one of contrast concerns the guests at Mrs. Jack's party, the fashionable "wasteland" people of 1929: "They were bored with love, and they were bored with hate. They were bored with men who worked, and with men who loafed. [Seven more elementary and antithetical parallels pad the passage, concluding] . . . They were bored with living, they were bored with dying, but -- they



were not bored that year with Mr. Piggy Logan and his circus of wire dolls" (YGCHA, 224). The reader has been bored by the trite and wordy passage, precisely the impression Wolfe would like to convey of the fashionable people. The "but" announcing a contrast after all the "and's," plus the dash which forces a climatic pause, are beautiful preparation for the ironic, anti-climatic conclusion.

A word might be added about Wolfe's use of the rhetorical figure, antithesis, accompanied as it so often is by parallelism and balance. Just as the antithetical elements of the previous quotation were joined by "and" until the climatic "but," so it is customary to find Wolfe speaking of pain and ecstasy rather than pain or ecstasy. He perceives the nature of the universe as a duality but he also sees these two aspects as co-existing, being equally true in the same interval of time. For this reason antithetical elements appear joined by "and," or juxtaposed as they were in the quotation contrasting the university and the city. In The Web and the Rock there is an entire series of itemized paragraphs describing first the nature of Esther and then the contrasting nature of George. Two of the briefer paragraphs follow as examples:

For her, the memory of great names and faces, the flashing stir and thrust of crowds, the shout of noonday in exultant cities, the stamp of the marching men and the great parades, the hard cry of the children playing in the street, and men who leaned at evening quietly on the sills of old dark brown.

For him, the great winds howling in the hills at night, the creaking of stiff boughs in Winter wind, and the great empurpled hills that faded faint and far into the edges of a limitless desire, the sound of a bell, wind-broken, the whistle cry that wailed away into blue gates and passes of the North and West. (W&R, 583)





Both perceptions are sensitive and romantic, both passages sound-oriented, yet the hustling, exciting, crowded city is effectively contrasted to the mystic, inspiring scope of the country that nurtured George.

Parallels can also itemize toward a summation. The concluding chapters of Of Time and the River show Eugene's increasing awareness of the Old World's similarity to America, but also his perception of the qualities that make America superior; finally, he decides to return home, basing his decision on the fact that Europe is "steeped in peace without hope, in beauty without joy, in tranquil and brooding resignation without exultancy. . ."(OT&R, 905). The first two carefully chosen parallels find unified restatement in the third, with "tranquil" suggesting "peace" and "beauty;" "resignation," the hopelessness; and "without exultancy," the joyless situation. "Brooding" contrasts with "tranquil" to show an inner disquietude and unhappiness plus a deadening inertia which cinches Eugene's decision to return home.

By the conclusion of You Can't Go Home Again, parallelism has surpassed summation to become the instrument of prophetic declamation. In very oratorical fashion the disembodied narrative voice proclaims such abstract doctrine as: "So, then, to every man his chance -- to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunity -- to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him -- this, seeker, is the promise of America" (YCGHA, 508). The apostrophe to the "seeker" is typical of many of the rhetorical passages of narrative commentary throughout Wolfe's writing. The use of the



apostrophe increases the sense of an audience-directed oration. Apostrophes are directed by Wolfe not only to such figures as the reader, the American, the seeker, but to abstractions such as death, loneliness, poetic inspiration, or as Fadiman parodies, "(O my America! O my!)"<sup>16</sup>

That Wolfe allowed himself to be carried away by his own rhetoric, we can see from his letters to Aline. Infuriated by some reproach from her, he writes: "Why, God's wounds, His liver and His guts, I have torn my accursed heart away from its moorings, I have ladled it up to you with smoking blood; I have unspun my entrails, counted my slow pulses, distilled my brain for you."<sup>17</sup> On he rants in Gantian style, the pencil boring into the page, the words scrawled and barely legible, attesting to his furious intensity as he describes how he has allowed himself to be possessed. However, the same letter, continued over a period of some two weeks before being mailed, contains an apology for the outbursts: "My Dear: I will not scratch a word out of my abominable ravings . . . you shall know me for the half-monster I am."<sup>18</sup> Analogously, we are not intended to take seriously the rhetorical rantings of such characters as W.O. Gant, Eugene, or George Webber. The characters generally intend them seriously, but Wolfe, as narrator beyond them in time and maturity, is merely recalling and repeating. Critics will pounce on a tirade such as Eugene's in Look Homeward, Angel where with much parallelism and repetition he snarls at his family:

I give thanks for every dirty lust and hunger that crawled through the polluted blood of my noble ancestors. I give thanks for every scrofulous token that may ever come upon me. I give thanks for the love and mercy that kneaded me over the washtub the day before my



birth. I give thanks for the country slut who nursed me and let my dirty bandage fester across my navel! I give thanks for every blow and curse I had from any of you during my childhood, for every dirty cell you ever gave me to sleep in, for the ten million hours of cruelty or indifference, and the thirty minutes of cheap advice. (LHA, 421)

How childish can Wolfe get? Is this his idea of great rhetorical prose? The answer is that Eugene, not Wolfe, is childish, resentful and bitter, taking an element of truth and exaggerating it rhetorically out of all proportion. Just as Wolfe's honesty prevented him from erasing his own ravings in the letters to Aline Bernstein, so he honestly records this phase of his development in the character of Eugene Gant and again in George Webber.

Returning more specifically to the devices of rhetoric, we might look at the following passage: "In the fierce, splendid, strange and secret North have I sought; and, on the other hand, in the secret, strange, splendid and fierce South. In the fatal web of the city strangely and bitterly have I savoured the strange and bitter miracle of life and wondered darkly at the dark wonder of man's destiny."<sup>19</sup> The passage is not Wolfe's but another excerpt from Fadiman's parody. Fadiman is quite right in choosing repetition as one of Wolfe's dominant characteristics but his take-off, humorous as it is, can not do justice to the complex and varied uses Wolfe makes of the device. Watkins assesses fairly when he says Wolfe's "elaborate repetitions and pointing words and phrases are occasionally as inept as the dull reiterations of a freshman theme, often as primitive as the incremental repetitions of a folk ballad, and sometimes as infinitely various as the work of a careful poet."<sup>20</sup>



Emphasis is one of the most obvious reasons for repetition. Wolfe describes Eugene's conscious recognition of Starwick's homosexuality and tells how he "with cold, measuring eyes of hate looked at Starwick's soft and graceful throat, the languid indolence of his soft, voluptuous, graceful figure" (OT&R, 765). Wolfe is not afraid to deliberately repeat himself; he does not fumble for a rephrased alternative but takes advantage of the repetition, as here, to emphasize his revulsion which grows just as the reiteration is augmented.

Repetition is also a characteristic of everyday speech with its more limited vocabulary range. Wolfe frequently uses repetition in his dialogue, therefore, to suggest a colloquial flavor. In The Web and the Rock, the following conversation appears:

"Dat guy? Je-sus! Is dat duh guy yuh mean?"

"Wich guy?"

"Dah guy dat said he was a friend of yours."

"A friend of mine! Je-sus! Who said he was a friend of mine?"

[More of this conversation is followed by Wolfe's comment] Oh, to hurl that stony gravel of their barren tongues forever, forever, with a million million barren repetitions into the barren ears of their fellow dead men, into the livid, sterile wink of night, hating their ugly, barren lives, their guts, and the faces of their fellow dead men -- hating, hating, always hating and unhappy! (W&R, 278)

The comment echoes the conversation in its repetitiveness, corresponding with the barrenness, the hatefulness of these life-destroying men.

Repetition is also used by Wolfe to establish mood, to link and to frame a passage. An excerpt from "No Door" illustrates these usages:





Storm shook the house at night -- the old house, my mother's house -- where I had seen my brother die. The old doors swung and creaked in darkness, darkness pressed against the house, the darkness filled us, filled the house at night, it moved about us soft and secret, palpable, filled with a thousand secret presences of sorrowful time and memory, moving about me as I lay below my brother's room in darkness, while storm shook the house and something creaked and rattled in the wind's strong blast.<sup>24</sup>

The passage is framed to move from outside to inside the house, to within the narrator, and back out again to the room, the storm and wind. The sentences lap forward, repeating a word from the previous sentence and building on it. The effect is one of pervasiveness, like the darkness that moves and surrounds.

Another example of framing repetition describes Eugene in a small cafe with "its small framed limits into which life passed briefly with a ring of jaunting hooves, a sudden casual nearness and loudness of passing voices, and then -- the fading and lonely recession of these homely sounds, a woman's burst of low and sensual laughter in the dark, the far-off dying out of jaunting hooves -- and silence" (OT&R, 889). The appeal is strictly auditory, describing the approach, the presence and, marked by a dash, the recession, ending in the repetition of the initial hoof sound, followed by another pause and the isolated, hollow "silence."

Repetition is also used on a larger scale to characterize, to establish leitmotifs through a scene, to turn images into symbols to structure chapters and to relate Wolfe's work as a whole. These uses will be best discussed in the final chapter of this paper. Finally, Wolfe's philosophy, as expressed in a newspaper story for the Asheville Citizen, 1937, entitled "Return," can be seen as an explanation for his



pronounced use of repetition as a rhetorical figure: "And all of it is as it has always been: again, again, I turn, and find again the things that I have always known: the cool sweet magic of starred mountain night, the huge attentiveness of dark, the slope, the street, the trees, the living silence of the houses waiting, and the fact that April has come back again . . . The wheel will turn, the immortal wheel of life will turn, but it will never change."<sup>22</sup> Wolfe has returned to Asheville after a seven year absence, an absence that followed the town's hostile reception of Look Homeward, Angel; still, for all the change there has ultimately been no change. There is a pun on turn/return, for every turn made is a re-turn on the wheel of life. The excerpt is repetitive, as is much of Wolfe's writing, because Wolfe's cosmic philosophy is one of cyclic recurrence.

Allusion belongs in a discussion of rhetorical devices for it persuades by bringing to bear the authority of another world of reference. Esther in her theatre world is described as one who had "intruded like some accidental Alice of the noon-day world, who had wandered in and out of green fields and flowery meadows, suddenly to find herself through the looking glass in a whole world of -- mirrors" (W&R, 332). Through the allusion Esther is associated with the natural, joyful world of the innocent, imaginative child. Her theatrical friends, by contrast, belong in a fantastic world of highly polished reflections, having no reality, no substance beyond their hard surfaces which change with each situation.

Wolfe's intensity heightened every event, every character, every emotion. It is not surprising, then, that Gulliver plagued by petty



Lilliputians should be given frequent allusion. It appears again when Gant returns to Altamont from a trip to California: "He stepped carefully down in squalid Toytown, noting that everything was low, near, and shrunken as he made his Gulliverian entry. He had a roof-and-gulley high conviction; with careful tucked-in elbows he weighted down the heated Toytown street-car" (LHA, 58). Fresh from the outside world, Gant is able to see the pettiness of the hill-bound Altamont. The sustained visual image of Gargantuan Gant (another facet of the name pun) is excellent.

The majority of Wolfe's allusions, however, are drawn from ancient myth. He speaks often of Euripides' "the apple tree, the singing and the gold," which I associate with Galsworthy's romantic tale, "The Apple Tree"; always it is used to evoke an idyllic golden aura. In another instance of allusion, the drunken Gant is treated tenderly and respectfully by the townsmen for they sense "something strange and proud and glorious lost in that drunken ruin of Babel" (LHA, 15). Babel brings in many associations such as the vaunting illusions, the attempt to be more than man, the reaching for the inscrutable, the misdirected efforts, divine punishment, the many tongues resulting, even perhaps the towering height which is also Gant's. Or, sarcastically, Wolfe likens the supersalesman idea of creating a need where none exists, to the blinding full-blown birth of Pallas Athene from the head of Zeus (W&R, 133). Elsewhere he speaks of city dwellers in terms of Tantalus for, "They are starving to death in the midst of abundance. The crystal stream flows near their lips but always falls away when they try to drink of it. The vine, rich-weighted with its golden fruit,



bends down, comes near, but springs back when they reach to touch it" (YCGHA, 427). To Aline Bernstein Wolfe writes, "I want eternal life, eternal renewal, eternal love, the vitality of these immortal figures: I see myself Sunk, a valiant wisp, between the mighty legs of Demeter, the earth Goddess, being wasted and filled eternally. I want life to ebb and flow in me in a mighty rhythm of oblivion and ecstasy."<sup>23</sup> The extremism and intensity with which Wolfe approached life are apparent here, as well as his conception of "eternal" as a process of death and rebirth, renewal of life through love, as illustrated here in the sexual image. Wolfe alludes to these figures of antiquity, then, because they represent the immortality he seeks. In addition, they bring with them a romantic epic world of infinite space and eternal time to elevate man and present circumstance. Beyond this, too much can be made of Wolfe's allusions. The eight chapters of Of Time and the River are named mythologically for Orestes, Telemachus, Proteus, Jason, Antaeus and others. The "Young Faustus" stage of this book, however, becomes Chapter 45 "Young Icarus" of You Can't Go Home Again, indicating that Wolfe's allusions have only a very general application. More importantly, his allusions establish an atmosphere, a mood. To pursue for specifics is to misunderstand the role of this figure in Wolfe's work.

Critics have also tried to make far too much of another form of allusion used by Wolfe, that of the quoted poetic fragment. Chapter 24 of Look Homeward, Angel, for example, is punctuated by unspoken quotations appearing as commentary on people and events; however, the technique appears in more isolated instances throughout Wolfe's writing. A critic like Mark Hawthorne writing on "Thomas Wolfe's Use of the





Poetic Fragment" hastens to differentiate Wolfe's use from Joyce's. He frets over the question of whether the lines are Eugene's stream-of-consciousness or Wolfe's authorial commentary, and casts his vote for the latter answer. He meticulously traces the lines to Shakespeare, Shelley, Milton, Vaughan, Donne, Wordsworth, Coleridge and others. What he says is not without some value, but it is such a tempest in a teapot. Hawthorne waxes eloquent with such remarks as: "Through the synthesis of fragment and action, Wolfe establishes a condition in which the individual is 'an infinitely significant microcosmic representation of the universe'" (240-41). If we take a random example from Chapter 24, Hawthorne's remark seems very pretentious. An old plow horse rests a moment and fertilizes the soil. This is followed by the quotation: "They also serve who only stand and wait" (LHA, 268). The line, of course, is an absolutely crucial acceptance by Milton in the sonnet "On His Blindness." Knowledge of the entire poem and the significance of the line increases the humor through contrast, but does not add to the stature of Eugene or to the meaning of the horse manure. Wolfe is perhaps illustrating one of his favorite themes: the unity of time present and time past; he is probably showing the literary saturation of the boy Eugene which causes poetry to spring to mind as real or more real than the present situation. Whether the commentary is actually that of Eugene, or of Wolfe recalling that period of his life, surely matters very little. Primarily, Wolfe is being funny. In another use of the fragment Mrs. Thelma Jarvis is described as she walks by: "Her round melon-heavy breasts nodded their heads in slow but sprightly dance. A poet could not but be gay, in such a jocund company"



(LHA, 285). To which, one might add another of Hawthorne's generalizations: ". . . through the suggestive texture Wolfe directly relates the particular action of his characters to the pervasive theme of spiritual growth and thus generalizes the significance of this famous chapter by tying it into the entire novel" (235). Hawthorne and others of his ilk should pay heed to Wolfe's comment, PN #6, 1928, that the use of quotations is a vicious habit not generally done to borrow energy or clearness but as a diploma of culture. "Said culture consists in our ability to quote scraps from Lamb, Dickens, John Keats, Browning, Dr. Johnson and Mathew Arnold. The distortion this works upon the original sinew of the mind is incalculable."<sup>24</sup>

Finally, we might explore the relationship between rhetoric and poetry as they pertain to Wolfe. The comment was made at the end of Chapter Three on Syntax that the abstract philosophical passages in Wolfe, while having certain poetic qualities, were nevertheless quite prosaic in other respects and should not be described as poetry. Similarly, most of the highly rhetorical passages quoted in this section have a rhythmic and emotional appeal that is "poetic," if you like, but these qualities alone do not make them poetry. Wolfe did not consider himself a poet. Told by an appreciative reader that he was really a poet, Wolfe denied it, adding, "(which, I confess, is what I should most like to be, and what, it seems to me, every man who ever wrote would want to be if he could)."<sup>25</sup> In the article "What a Writer Reads," Wolfe says: ". . . my greatest and most unfailing source of diversion and repose during these years of hard creative labor was in poetry. And I think it is fitting that this should be true, because I think



'most of us will agree that of all the types of imaginative writing, poetry is probably the richest, the densest, the most complex and compact -- in short, the most 'difficult.'"<sup>26</sup> Just as Wolfe saw his style was not Hemingway's and yet admired Hemingway's fiction, so he recognized that poetry was not his form much as he loved it. In the manuscripts some hundred lines or so of fragmented verse appear. Although there is some echoing of themes and concerns, most of the poems are adolescent doggerel. Several are vaguely reminiscent of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," and ring false in their elevated, archaic language, loaded with apostrophes and imperatives. As a point of interest, I have included in the appendix one of Wolfe's manuscript poems, although he refused to call it that in writing to Aline: "What I have written is not a poem -- you know I believe poetry lives now silently in the hearts of poets who are too loyal to speak out at a time when only the small cad, who has never written poetry, is called one . . . I do not call it poetry -- I have enough religion for that -- It is for you."<sup>27</sup> I consider this "poem" to be the best of the ones I read by Wolfe, yet even here the strictures of rhyme and rhythm and stanza form are apparent, an obtrusion on his language rather than a complement.

John Hall Wheelock edited a collection of prose passages which he felt proved Wolfe a poet and published them under the title The Face of a Nation (1939). John S. Barnes went a step further in A Stone, a Leaf, a Door (1946), respacing passages from Wolfe into a free verse format to illustrate that he was indeed a poet. These well-intentioned attempts are misdirected. Just as Wolfe recognized that he had certain



talents for the dramatic form and incorporated those qualities of dramatic action and dialogue into his prose, realizing that the restrictions of the overall dramatic form were not congenial to his natural bent, so Wolfe wrote prose, as the form best suited to his talents, although the qualities of his prose are often those more commonly associated with poetry, making what he wrote, in this sense, most "poetic" prose.

## 3

Amorphous Figures

Diction, syntax, imaginative and rhetorical devices combine to produce certain effects, largely of tone, that fall in no neat category and yet are an important facet of language. Such effects include paradox, overstatement, understatement, humor, satire, irony, parody and other tonal variations that reveal the author's view of life and attitude to the specific material at hand.

In "God's Lonely Man," Wolfe says: "the tragic writer knows that joy is rooted at the heart of sorrow, that ecstasy is shot through with the sudden crimson thread of pain, that the knife-thrust of intolerable desire and the wild, brief glory of possession are pierced most bitterly, at the very instant of man's greatest victory, by the premonitory sense of loss and death. So seen, and so felt, the best and worst that the human heart can know are merely different aspects





of the same thing, and are interwoven, both together, into the tragic web of life" (HB, 192). Life is a "living contradiction, the undemonstrable but overwhelming unity which comprises every antithesis by which men live and die. . ." (W&R, 456). The oxymoron of diction and paradox of rhetoric are native to such a dualistic perception. Their presence has already been noted in many previous quotations so that a few specific instances should suffice. Oxymorons such as the "million-noted silence" (OT&R, 29), or the train poised "in moveless movement, unsilent silence, spaceless flights" (OT&R, 77) hinge on the element of universal time in Wolfe's novels and the contradiction this produces between appearance and reality. The train appears to be moving rapidly and silently through the night, but in the context of eternity and infinity, the true reality of one time and one space, the moment of apparent silence is million-noted and the train stands still. Similarly, from a cosmic perspective man can be described as one "who is great because he is so small, who is so strong because he is so weak, who is so brave because he is so full of fear --" (W&R, 299). Perception of this sort requires a distance, an objectivity, a realism and tragic vision that Wolfe does not always display, but which nevertheless accompanies the subjective, romantic, optimistic side of his nature.

Fadiman parodies Wolfe's contradictions when he speaks of "that strange, familiar, native, alien expression common to all the Gants."<sup>28</sup> These oxymorons are typical of Wolfe and have their connection with the lost paradise theme: man as a stranger, an exile in this world, who still has dim recollections and intuitions of past



glory and brotherhood. Fadiman's dart comes very near the bulls-eye in this instance, for there are some gauche and indefensible passages in Wolfe that hammer this idea; the worst instances are those set in the mind and terminology of twelve-year-old George Webber. For example, a dog fight has occurred and George lies pondering: "Great God, this is the way things are, I see and know this is the way things are, I understand this is the way things are: and, Great God! Great God! this being just the way things are, how strange, and plain, and savage, sweet and cruel, lovely, terrible, and mysterious, and how unmistakable and familiar all things are!" (W&R, 21) The temptation is to read this as attempted humor, but nothing in the context supports such an interpretation. It is simply poor judgment and bad writing.

The dualistic nature of man is a source of many paradoxes. For example, Dick Prosser -- the Negro friend and mad-man killer -- is described by Wolfe as "a symbol of man's evil innocence, and the token of his mystery, a projection of his own unfathomed quality, a friend, a brother, and a mortal enemy, an unknown demon -- our loving friend, our mortal enemy, two worlds together -- a tiger and a child" (W&R, 156). Eugene describes his friend and enemy Starwick in precisely these terms, while Wolfe's dualistic attitude to the members of his own family, to Aline, to Maxwell Perkins, to all those of close acquaintance, reflects this same perception.

The "poem" to Aline included in the appendix speaks of man as a god half-risen, one whose spirit is too large for its frame, who aspires to the stars but continually falls back into the jungle. The conclusion of The Web and the Rock contains very similar sentiments as



George perceives that "we who are men are more than men and less than spirit. What have we but the pinion of a broken wing to soar half-heavenward?" (693) George accepts the limitations of his body and the fact that his spiritual hunger must always exceed his physical grasp. This acceptance is Wolfe's, as well, on a realistic, rather fatalistic level, but the romantic in him could never accept this as a philosophy of daily life. For this reason, Germany and its people aroused conflicting emotions. In his novels and in his letters he speaks paradoxically with admiration for their spiritual fineness but with disgust for their physical grossness. To Aline Bernstein he writes:

All about me I see the jungle rut and ramp -- the little furtive eyes all wet with lust, and the brutes heavy of jowl and gut, and ropy with their sperm.

I see the flower face, the compassionate eyes of love and beauty, the pure untainted loveliness -- I see it under the overwhelming shade of darkness: the hairy stench, the thick blunt fingers -- fumbling for the breast, the foul wet belly.

But I say that a man who has seen the darkness is one who believes most earnestly in the light; and that we who know the living weight of evil -- whose dark face is bent above the world -- must also believe in the living power of good. (29)

There is back-handed acceptance here in the sense that love, beauty, light and good emerge with the experience and recognition of overwhelming darkness and evil. Wolfe's choice of imagery shows us an association of the lusty, sexual, brute side of man with darkness and evil while pure untainted loveliness is linked with light and good. This ascetic elevation of man's spiritual nature is echoed in a letter to Aline written some three years later: "if I do not work and create now, I will die . . . I need your help, and I need your friendship,



and I need your love and belief -- but the time of madness, darkness, passion is over, we can never relive that."<sup>30</sup> A man of great personal excesses, Wolfe was very aware of the brute in himself. And while he may have accepted the physical as a dark but necessary side of man's nature, it was the light, the spiritual side, that he continually sought.

Holman notes that the structure of paradox underlies Wolfe's work at every level and concludes, Wolfe "seemed to need to define a thing's opposite before he could comprehend the thing, and to have a naïve faith that somehow the meaning was manifest if the opposite were stated."<sup>31</sup> In Wolfe's novels, this philosophy results in predominantly negative scenes of evil, of sensual indulgence, of disillusionment from and through which Wolfe asserts a positive optimistic view of life. The reader, however, has been shown evil and been largely told of good. The overall effect is to make Wolfe seem very naïvely romantic in philosophy, precisely because he has depicted the "overwhelming shade of darkness" so realistically and exhaustively.

Wolfe's intense love of life and awareness of death, his extreme and varying moods, result in much extravagant expression, what Kussy calls an all-embracing exaggeration in which distinctions as to importance or value naturally tend to be lost.<sup>32</sup> In The Story of a Novel Wolfe tells of the "Where Now?" sections in his Notebooks and explains that these recorded those "thousands of things which all of us have seen for just a flash, a moment in our lives, which seem to be of no consequence whatever at the moment that we see them, and which live in our minds and hearts forever, which are somehow pregnant





with all the joy and sorrow of the human destiny, and which we know, somehow, are therefore more important than many things of more apparent consequence" (20). In Wolfe's hypersensitive perception, a woman's laugh, a face seen in a crowd, a leafy rustle of trees, took on universal significance. As the chapter on syntax noted, there was little attempt to differentiate or to rank these epiphanic moments in the telling, although they are selected with greater care and their universal significance stated more clearly in the later books. While some readers may feel, as Beja and others do, that the epiphanies, the revelations, are overdone in Wolfe and lose credibility through their number and uniformly superlative quality,<sup>33</sup> still one must accept them as an inherent part of the author's nature and vision and not as some technique of expression that could easily have been altered.

Many of Wolfe's images are hyperbolic. A simple example would be Wolfe's observation of grass after an early fall frost: "The bladed grass, a forest of small spears of ice, is thawed by noon."<sup>34</sup> It is his nature to magnify. Horrendous scenes result from this tendency but so do ones of great comedy. Gant, for example, had allowed a widow to move in with him. Sick of her, he returned one evening "insanely drunk, routed her out of her chamber and pursued her unfrocked, untoothed, unputtied, with a fluttering length of kimono in her palsied hand, driving her finally into the yard beneath the big cherry tree, which he circled, howling, making frantic lunges for her as she twittered with fear, casting splintered glances all over the listening neighborhood as she put on the crumpled wrapper, hid partially the indecent jigging of her breasts, and implored succor. It did not come"



(LHA, 237-38). The ridiculous scene is given in one overblown, hilarious sentence, and is followed effectively by a simple four-word conclusion. In another delightful description Wolfe combines overstatement and understatement to produce an effect very like the humor of Stephen Leacock. A wild stallion has sighted his fair owner. Instantly, "his face was transfigured with a holier joy than he had ever known before. Sobbing, the Lady Violet threw her arms around his proud neck and planted little kisses all among his mane. Transported by his joy he flung out his heels sideways, catching the aged groom broadside and, I am sorry to say, killing him instantly."<sup>35</sup> The rare use of personification appears here for comic effect. "Among" his mane calls up a ridiculous image while the casually interjected, "I am sorry to say," highlights the ludicrous scene.

Understatement occurs in connection with the tragic spectrum, as well. A horrifying paragraph of loathsome stench, rotting death, anesthetized impotence and cancerous putrescence, describing Gant's approaching death, concludes: "At the end it was not well" (OY&R, 83). The ability to describe an entire scene in low-keyed unemotional tone is more apparent in Wolfe's later work. The passage in which the posse captured and riddled Dick Prosser is an effective example of understatement. Similarly Monk recalls waving to two little friends in a wagon. Then, "He saw the car hit the boys, smash their wagon into splinters, and drag Albert on his face for fifty yards. And Albert's wagon had been painted bright yellow, and on the sides had been printed the word 'Leader'" (W&R, 107). The dispassionate recall of the event and the inclusion of irrelevant detail increases the horror. Sometimes



in The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again the reader may wish that Wolfe would indulge in more of his old extravagance. The fire at the Jack's party, for example, seems to me a case of flat, colorless story-telling rather than of effective understatement, if indeed that was the intent. I would agree with Beja, however, that George's last train trip out of Germany and the capture of the little Jewish man by border police is so terrifying, precisely because of "its relative calm, the frighteningly low key of its presentation."<sup>36</sup>

Humor, in all its forms, is an important quality of Wolfe's writing. Even in Look Homeward, Angel, the most personal and subjective of Wolfe's books, he demonstrated the ability to laugh at himself. Similarly, his Purdue Speech (1937) is full of good-natured humor at his own expense. He tells, for example, of considering himself a "Saturday Evening Post Writer" after the acceptance of one story, and adds some writers in horror have asked him:

if I would even listen to an offer from Hollywood -- if I could possibly submit my artistic conscience to the prostitution of allowing anything I'd written to be bought in Hollywood, made into a moving picture by Hollywood. My answer to this has always been an enthusiastic and fervent yes. If Hollywood wants to prostitute me by buying one of my books for the movies, I am not only willing but eager for the seducers to make their first dastardly appeal. In fact, my position in the matter is very much that of the Belgian virgin the night the Germans took the town: "When do the atrocities begin?" (30-31)

The devices of parallelism and repetition lead up to his unexpected and fervent yes, while the seeding of melodramatic words such as "prostitute," "seducers," and "dastardly" lay the groundwork for the punch-line analogy.



Wolfe's ear for mimickry made parody a natural tendency. In the manuscript poems various not-very-clever take-offs appear, such as:

Gahd of Owld Ireland  
 Known of old  
 Lord of our Far-  
 Flung Strength and Craft  
 Beneath whose Awful Hand  
 We hold  
 Dominion over Bribe and Graft.<sup>37</sup>

A letter to Aline Bernstein comments on the countless exhibitions in European cities, adding, "It is not that Art is long but that Junk is unending."<sup>38</sup> In Look Homeward, Angel, a parody of pulp romances ends: "Ah, me! Ah, me! Eugene's heart was filled with joy and sadness -- with sorrow because the book was done. He pulled his clotted handkerchief from his pocket and blew the contents of his loaded heart into it in one mighty, triumphant and ecstatic blast of sentiment" (89). The rhythm and rhetoric of the pulp story is continued into the commentary. The nose blowing adds a ludicrous touch, an image incongruent with the lofty style. In a letter to Aline Bernstein, Wolfe tells of a sketch he has written concerning Scribner's difficulties with the Boston censors. It is to be entitled "L-ve In B-ston."<sup>39</sup> Or, there is the description of Mr. Leonard as farm-boy cum school principal. A lofty passage of Leonard's high ideals on educative purposes and administrative authority is followed by:

XXX

Cows came when he called.

XXX (LHA, 332).





Wolfe's irony can be of this pin-prick deflating type; it can be an even more obvious reversal of expectations as in: "Eliza wept or was silent to his curse, nagged briefly in retort to his rhetoric, gave like a punched pillow to his lunging drive -- and slowly, implacably had her way" (LHA, 16). Or, the irony can be so harsh and abrasive that the reader winces. In The Web and the Rock, for example, George sneers at Esther:

. . . with an insane and mincing parody of her complaint: ". . . What have you done to this nice, sweet, female American maid who hardly knows the difference between sodomy and rape, she is so pure and innocent: what did you mean, you depraved scoundrel, by seducing this pure, sweet, girl of forty when you were twenty-four at the time, and should have been ashamed to rob this Broadway milkmaid of her fair virginity? Shame on you, you big country slicker, for coming here among these simple, trusting city bastards and wreaking your guilty passion upon this innocent, blushing bride before she had had scarcely twenty-five years experience in the ways of love!" (W&R, 567)

And on he rants in one of his prepared and much rehearsed speeches. The self-righteous bitterness concerning Esther's age, her supposed worldliness and corruption, her supposed pretence of innocence and simplicity, her wealthy and theatrical friends -- all this spills out in vicious irony, caustic sarcasm. Wolfe says of Eugene that, "He was so bitter with his tongue because his heart believed so much" (186), and this seems a fair assessment of Wolfe himself. So aware of the dark side of life, believing so firmly in the light side, it was inevitable that the glaring disparities should find display in a full range of parody, irony, sarcasm and satire.

It is probably also true that Wolfe was too personally involved, too intense, to write well the more intellectual forms of humor. His



use of humor whether for comic or abrasive effect is never very subtle or "clever." In a forenote to The Web and the Rock, Wolfe states that this novel is more objective and that it has, "from first to last, a strong element of satiric exaggeration: not only because it belongs to the nature of the story -- 'the innocent man' discovering life -- but because satiric exaggeration also belongs to the nature of life, and particularly American life" (W&R, v). Some critics, then, have looked for a marked increase in irony and satire in the Webber cycle; however, a more naïve and romantic hero than Eugene Gant would be difficult to find, or exaggeration much greater than that from the distorted viewpoint of such a child and adolescent. The greater objectivity is apparent, however: George's ultimate rejection of Esther, of fame, and of his editor Foxhall Edwards, for example, have neither the passion nor caustic quality of Eugene's rejection of his family or of his homosexual friend Starwick in Of Time and the River. With greater detachment, the satire directed at the American Dream in The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again is no doubt more cool and clever than some of Wolfe's vitriolic outbursts over more strictly personal concerns. Whether the detachment results in better writing in general is a more debatable point.



## CHAPTER V

### LANGUAGE AS VISION

When Wolfe spoke of the organized, unified articulation he sought, he undoubtedly meant the overall structure of his work, as well as that of the individual components. Despite the fact that his personal chronology provided an underlying structure, the episodic nature of Wolfe's creative process was bound to make the final job of ordering, rewriting and binding into separate volumes an arduous and unsatisfactory one -- unsatisfactory, because the chronicle of his life traced a rising line of development which could only be broken by force into separate and incomplete sections. Look Homeward, Angel seems most unified and satisfactory in structure to the reader simply because it tells a story of growth from childhood through adolescence, a story that we recognize as a plot structure familiar to literature through the ages. The remaining three novels, while following chronologically, do not seem in themselves to have a structure that is either recognizable or satisfactory. Structurally these latter books need to be read as parts of a quaternary and even then the rising action is unfinished, for You Can't Go Home Again looks ahead to new lands and new beginnings just as Wolfe, his life unfinished, was looking to the future.

Whether the critic approaches Wolfe inductively through his fictional work and the form of his smaller units of thought, or



deductively through his comments in his notebooks, letters and published statements on theory, he must confront the problem and the importance of form for Wolfe. Pocket Notebook #12 contains a draft of a letter to Jim Boyd in which Wolfe says, "You are a swell guy even if you do have decided theories of Form. It will be a proud day in my life when you wring my hand and say: 'Son, the style and structure of your last book makes Flaubert look like an anarchist. I have done you a Great Wrong.'"<sup>1</sup> The letter proceeds in humorous vein, the comment resembling Wolfe's tongue-in-cheek remark in Pocket Notebook #31: "This is a note on travel -- just a simple bare anatomy, written with the spare economy for which my style is justly noted."<sup>2</sup> Wolfe could be light-hearted and philosophical about the matter of form, although it gave him hours of agony. It would be grossly inaccurate to assume, however, that the form Wolfe speaks of and that he sought was the form of a Flaubert or James. To Aline Bernstein, Wolfe bemoans the groping sprawl of his letters, many of which reach thirty pages in length; nevertheless, it is apparent that he associates her neat proportion and perfection with dishonesty. As he says: "Your letters are incomparably superior to mine, but I believe they are less honest . . . [yours] do not sprawl -- they work up swiftly to a note of passion, and decline accurately to one of hope or despair."<sup>3</sup> Even those who find Wolfe's lack of conventional form most abhorrent, will admit that honesty and sincerity are qualities that do radiate from Wolfe's writing, perhaps, as he suggests, at the necessary expense of polished and traditional form.





One of Wolfe's first literary efforts, a play written at Harvard and variously entitled "Niggertown" or "Welcome to Our City," casts an interesting light on the matter of form. The play has ten scenes, all requiring a set change. Floods of characters move in and out of the script, few remaining throughout. The town is shown from all angles -- culturally, politically, economically, educationally, sociologically -- and from viewpoints of old, young, Negro and white. The plot consists of plans to wipe out "Niggertown" in the midst of a prospering town (urban renewal in modern terminology) -- but the plot is clearly just a vehicle. When the one house that had come to represent Negro resistance is burnt off stage in the last scene, the characters remark that it doesn't seem to matter any more -- nor does it to the reader, or viewer, undoubtedly. A New York Guild director was interested in producing the play if Wolfe would revise it. In a most revealing letter, Wolfe writes to Mrs. Roberts that he has been asked "to develop a central plot which will run through each scene, and which would revolve around a small group of central figures, -- Rutledge, the girls, etc. -- of course this would mean a more conventional type of play. I told him I had deliberately tried to avoid writing such a play; that I had written a play with a plot which centered about the life and destiny of an entire civilization, not about a few people."<sup>4</sup>

It should not be surprising, then, that Wolfe's novels, also expressing the epic vision of America, should consist of a wealth of episodes and ideas intended to convey the abundance and variety, the complex nature of Wolfe's central concern, the American experience. In a perceptive image, Wolfe likens the chapters of his novels to "a



row of lights which one sometimes sees at night from the windows of a speeding train, strung out across the dark and lonely countryside" (SN, 54). Wolfe's structure is indeed one of separate flashes of illumination and his individual books are best read with this philosophy of episodic structure in mind. The episodes in The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again appear to be more carefully selected for their philosophical import/universal impact, perhaps in accordance with Wolfe's statement in The Story of a Novel that he now believed "so far as the artist is concerned, the unlimited extent of human experience is not so important for him as the depth and intensity with which he experiences things" (SN, 47). The episode of the party at Mrs. Jack's (YCGHA), for example, entails some hundred pages of indepth commentary and narration. However, it must be kept in mind that the increased selectivity may owe far more to Aswell's editorial hand than to Wolfe's resolve. It is valid for critics to find personally distasteful Wolfe's attitude to form and to say so, but criticism becomes unfair when it attacks Wolfe for failure to achieve the conventional plot-oriented form he deliberately avoided. As Wolfe writes in his pocket notebook: "What is a novel? You cannot fix the form of a novel as the form of a sonnet is fixed. A novel is War and Peace and Moby Dick and David Copperfield and Pickwick Papers -- But it is also Pride and Prejudice, The Red Badge of Courage, Ulysses and the Nigger of the Narcissus."<sup>5</sup>

The more inductive approach is to extend the structural tendencies noted in the previous chapters of this thesis, and to thus move from mode of expression to mold of expression. One arrives at



much the same expectations of Wolfe's form. This final chapter, then, will build on the earlier chapters of analysis, showing that more comprehensive elements of structure, including verb tense, point of view, characterization and symbol, are consistent extensions of stylistic qualities and Wolfean philosophy discussed in previous chapters.

To begin with, Chapter II on syntax and Chapter IV, 2 on rhetorical figures have a great deal to contribute to an understanding of Wolfe's overall structure. Wolfe's sentences are long, inclusive, and loosely organized; so is the one long book(s) of his life. Just as his sentences frequently have an underlying structure of time, as evidenced by time connectives or sequential arrangement, so do his books. Sentence parts are often juxtaposed leaving the linkage to the reader; so are the chapters of his books and the books themselves. Like Wolfe's sentences, the books rely on cumulative effect rather than on refinement, although intensity is sought in the later books through greater selectivity and exploration in depth rather than in breadth. As the sentences move from concrete to abstract, specific to universal, so do the books. Wolfe's sentences are not engineered for suspense nor for logical argumentative progression; nor are his novels. The blurring of the sentence as a unit of thought parallels the blurring of the individual novel as unit of expression. As in Wolfe's sentences, repetition and parallelism are frequently used in the novels to give structure within the loose overall frame. The first two chapters of Look Homeward, Angel, for example, recount respectively the background of Gant, ending "O lost!" and then the background of Eliza Pentland and her marriage with Gant, ending again "O lost!" These two characters



and their union will set in motion the conflict and the tone of the book, just as the structure of the opening chapters suggests. Innumerable examples of such structuring exist throughout Wolfe's work, as in the chapter entitled "The Lion Hunters" in You Can't Go Home Again where isolated vignettes are given of the fashionable people who temporarily cultivate the young artist. Each is followed by a comment to the effect, "But surely none can say that he was ever bitter" (348), or "And yet, he would not have it thought that he was bitter" (351). On a larger scale, parallel episodes of rejection can be seen throughout the four novels. Structuring is also accomplished, as it is in Wolfe's sentences and paragraphs, by the repetition of images which gradually emerge as symbols, growing throughout Wolfe's work, accruing meaning and contributing unity. These will be discussed separately as a very concrete embodiment of Wolfe's philosophy.

Verb tense as a stylistic and structural element is very closely connected to Wolfe's philosophy of time, a philosophy that finds expression both fictively and autobiographically. All four novels take place primarily in the past tense: the voice of the third person narrator is basically one of reminiscence and recall while main characters spend a great deal of time foraging in the past as well. Only in scenes involving dialogue or the stream-of-consciousness technique does the reader feel the present tense to any extent and even then the overall framework of narrative recall is operative. Wolfe valued his memory highly as part of his creative equipment. In The Story of a Novel he speaks of the years of torrential writing as a time when "my whole sensory and creative equipment, my powers of feeling and





reflection -- even the sense of hearing, and above all, my powers of memory, had reached the greatest degree of sharpness that they had ever known" (58). Later in the same theoretical work, Wolfe describes the silence and death-like inactivity of people as he moved among them in his dreams, only coming to life after he had passed by" (67-68). The remark seems true of Wolfe's waking and writing experience as well. Events and people seem to have living reality for Wolfe only after he has passed them in time and is able to look back upon them. At the same time Wolfe makes clear in The Story of a Novel that more real and true than the scenes of memory and inheritance were "those landscapes that somehow had been derived from them -- the streets, the towns, the houses and the faces that I saw and imagined not the way they were, but the way they should be" (65-66). Memory's most important role, then, was as a foundation and source for the creations of the imagination, the greater reality. Wolfe defined the truth of fiction as material transformed into poetic and imaginative fact (PS, Intro., 14), and it was his memory and reflective powers that provided the material for transformation. While Wolfe aspired to the greater reality in the world of the imagination, nevertheless, it remained largely an elusive goal in the future. Wolfe was tied to his past as his books so amply demonstrate. In an essay on Coleridge, Wolfe remarked that it was probably fortunate Coleridge had never taken the actual sea voyage recounted in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," for "the flight of his imagination would, I think, have been restrained by the recollection of fact and incident."<sup>6</sup> The reader turning to The Web and the Rock only to find the life of the "new" hero, George Webber,



to be pointlessly and annoyingly similar to that of Eugene Cant/Thomas Wolfe, can only feel that Wolfe's adherence to actuality greatly impaired his imaginative transformation on occasion, for what emerges in this instance is certainly not the "truth of fiction." Wolfe's capacity for experience and his fantastic memory were not always an asset.

In Look Homeward, Angel Eugene's brother Ben presents him with a watch on his twelfth birthday, along with the wish that he may learn to keep time better than the rest of his family have. The problem of what constitutes proper time-keeping appears in all of Wolfe's novels. In The Story of a Novel Wolfe explains that the time question created particular difficulties for him throughout the composition of Of Time and the River. Three times emerged: the first, that of present time, of forward moving narrative leading to the immediate future; secondly, past time in the sense that the experiences of the moment are conditioned by those of the past; thirdly, "time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day" (51-52). This concept of time immutable is strongly reminiscent of Ecclesiastes Chapter 1:4 which says, "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever." Subsequent verses also refer to the sun, the wind, rivers and the sea. The epiphanic moments in Wolfe's early work are clearly an attempt to "fix" time; through recall of the past from present stimuli, he can halt the flow of time and become, for the moment, part of time immutable. There is



no sense of fusion, however, of present and past time -- the reader is quite aware when recall has taken him backward. The present is influenced by the past but the two do not become simultaneous in Wolfe's work. The marked use of present participles and progressive verbs, earlier noted, belongs, I believe, to Wolfe's concept of present time that leads into the immediate future. The future tense is conspicuous by its absence. Even when Eugene and George daydream of future events the verb form is "would be" rather than "will be," the conditional consistent with the pervasive past tense.

In The Story of a Novel Wolfe expressed guilt for his obsession with the past and disregard for present time which had been hurtling by unheeded. He says, I felt "I had grown old in some evil and enchanted place, I had allowed my life to waste and rot in the slothful and degrading surfeits of Circean time. And now my life was lost -- my work undone --" (66). The wealth of natural imagery noted in Chapter IV has bearing at this point. In the world of nature Wolfe found confirmation of a cyclical time in which change was ultimately changeless. W.P. Albrecht sums up Wolfe's position clearly when he says:

The permanent and qualitative, therefore, may be found in the temporary and quantitative, for transient multiplicity reflects timeless uniformity. The repetition of the archetype through numberless forms is a cyclical concept of time inherent in the pre-existence-and-return myth and in the metaphor of the buried life [the recognition of the essential commonality and brotherhood of man] . . . It is to this conception of permanence in change -- of growth with time and the repetition of eternal forms through growth -- that Wolfe turns for his final solution of the problem of the individual and society in relation to time.<sup>7</sup>

Albrecht adds that the problem of linear time dominates the first three novels while the solution of cyclical time dominates the fourth. Here



he errs, or at best is incomplete. The cyclical concept is that of Ecclesiastes 1:9 which says, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun." Ecclesiastes 9:11 adds the fatalistic note: "time and chance happeneth to them all." Chapter 47 in You Can't Go Home Again entitled Ecclesiasticus defines the philosophy of Foxhall Edwards (Maxwell Perkins) as that of Ecclesiastes and it is precisely this philosophy which Wolfe rejects. He asserts instead that "the essence of Time is Flow, not Fix" (731), and that the essence of his religion is "that man's life can be, and will be, better" (738). Cyclical time can only lead to fatalistic acceptance. Linear time must govern man's belief. As Wolfe says: "You and the Preacher [Ecclesiastes] may be right for all eternity, but we Men-Alive, dear Fox, are right for Now" (YCGHA, 738). Nature has a lesson for man, but nature is not one with man, a point illustrated in Wolfe's metaphorical use of nature while personification is generally absent.

In a letter to Mrs. Roberts, Wolfe commented on the tendency of Eugene O'Neill to look backward in his plays. "Tragedy if continued in this vein, will become sordid and brutal. Surely this does not represent his outlook on life. Great tragedy, I think, must look ahead."<sup>8</sup> Each of Wolfe's novels does end with a look ahead. Look Homeward, Angel concludes with Ben's advice to Eugene to voyage into his own soul, and Eugene stands with his back to the town, "his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges" (522). Of Time and the River ends with Eugene's discovery of Esther and the promise of love. The Web and the Rock concludes with the reconciliation of George Webber's body





and soul and the promise of new serenity, new hope, while You Can't Go Home Again echoes a vision to be found in all four novels: "the vision of man's true home, beyond the ominous and cloud-engulfed horizon of the here and now, in the green and hopeful and still-virgin meadows of the future" (704). It is a vision that belongs to Milton's "Lycidas," as does the title of Look Homeward, Angel. Milton's narrator perceives death as a release and a new life for his friend Lycidas and turns, "Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new."<sup>9</sup> The philosophy is directly opposed to Ecclesiastes 7:8 "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof."

The last words of You Can't Go Home Again are George's confidential words to the Fox that "something has spoken in the night, and told me I shall die, I know not where. Saying:

'To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth --

' -- Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending -- a wind is rising, and the rivers flow" (743). This has been read by many as a romantic premonition of death, which is a feasible interpretation. However, George in leaving his editor and the philosophy he represents, has turned his back on another phase of his life and faced toward another new beginning. This crucial step is a death and rebirth for George as it was for Wolfe. And this, I think, is the meaning Wolfe intends. The marked use of the present tense in the concluding chapters of You Can't



Go Home Again can be attributed to the fact that they are a fictionalized version of the conclusion of Wolfe's Purdue Speech (1937). After four novels, Wolfe's hero had finally caught up to him in philosophical development, as the unity of their voices in the present tense confirms. The progressives and infinitives are as close as Wolfe can come to the future. Cyclical time, his cosmic philosophy, permits no real future, only a repetition of the past, while linear time, as a day-to-day philosophy of life, can only see an immediate future extending from the present moment.

The distance between Wolfe and his character creations mentioned above with reference to the conclusion of You Can't Go Home Again, brings up the structural matter of point of view. The autobiographical sketch that Wolfe poured into two notebooks, in preparation for the writing of Look Homeward, Angel, is told entirely in the first person. Wolfe's interest in the first person is reflected as well in such indications as the list of the great "I" books of the world which appears in his pocket notebook #31, including such books as Moby Dick, Huck Finn, David Copperfield, Gulliver, Remembrance of Things Past, and Leaves of Grass. Why, then, did Wolfe choose to write his novels in the third person? Not, I think, because he wished to avoid the appearance of autobiography. Certainly his books make little attempt to disguise that fact. Besides, Look Homeward, Angel had appeared in the third person before Wolfe had been put on the defensive by the autobiographical charges of the critics. Wolfe's choice derives, I believe, from his experience with play-writing, which permits of no authorial comment. As a result, Wolfe had been forced to put everything into



the speech of his characters. Accordingly, the talk is interminable and frequently unbelievable. The critics who find the satire crude and the lyricism misplaced in Wolfe's novels, should read his plays.

Look Homeward, Angel actually makes use of a dual point of view. The third person omniscient narrator speaks from a more mature and detached vantage point. His voice takes us into the minds of other characters and describes events taking place in Eugene's absence. The distance between this narrator and the character of Eugene permits the presence of irony and satire. The danger, of course, lies in the fact that this know-it-all voice is impossible from a realistic standpoint. If abused, this narrative stance can turn the reader into a passive observer while the narrative, itself, may lose all sense of focus. Look Homeward, Angel escapes these dangers because the point of view is often not omniscient but rather third person central, perceiving the events and characters through the eyes of the main character Eugene. Look Homeward, Angel is the most "romantic" of Wolfe's novels precisely because so much is given through the subjective, emotional, idealistic focus of the young hero. The result is the exuberance, the exaggeration, the violent shifts in mood, the original expressions, the startling imagery, the mystical and heroic aura, the concrete, sensory impressions -- all the qualities noted in the preceding chapters to be connected with Wolfe's earlier period of composition. In addition, third person central is a more believable point of view; it increases the sense of immediacy and the degree of reader involvement. Of Time and the River is quite similar in point of view to Look Homeward, Angel. The greater tendency to abstraction and the universalizing



of Eugene does create a slightly greater distance, however, between the two narrative voices. Still, as in Look Homeward, Angel, the voice of Eugene and the voice of Wolfe recalling and reliving this period of his past are often indistinguishable, the blurring and blending not a liability but an asset. In the Webber cycle, Wolfe takes pains to separate his objective, omniscient voice from that of George, resulting in occasional speeches by the hero which are philosophically foreign to his level of development. The disparity is never so glaring in the Gant cycle where the reader is offered the alternative of interpreting the thought as belonging to Eugene or to the narrator.

Wolfe wrote to Aswell concerning the manuscript on which he was working and from which the Webber cycle was taken. He was writing, he said, a book "of discovery, hence of union with life; not a book of personal revolt, hence of separation from life. The protagonist becomes significant not as the tragic victim of circumstances, the romantic hero in conflict and revolt against his environment, but as a kind of polar instrument round which the events of life are grouped. . . ."10 George Webber may be a centre pole but he is definitely not as central to the individual episodes in his cycle as Eugene Gant was in Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River. The reader feels little involvement with him at all, in fact. The narrator launches into The Web and The Rock as a distinct "I" and within the short space of seventeen pages has dispensed with George's ancestry, his early life, and the typicality of the town of Libya Hill. George is twelve years old without one memorable moment having been given to the reader. Again from his lofty perch the narrator makes such stuffy and obtrusive





announcements as the following: "We have now reached that portion of our narrative where it becomes our agreeable privilege to inform the reader of an event which he must have been eagerly anticipating for some time -- namely, the entrance of our young hero into the literary life of the great city . . ." (W&R, 487).

Wolfe did make various experiments with point of view, certainly not all successful. A rather interesting variation occurs in The Web and the Rock when Wolfe shifts the incessant arguments of Esther and George into play form: "He, breathing hoarsely, ominously: 'Are you going now, or not?' She, her voice now high and trembling again: 'I'm going! I'm going!'" (W&R, 403) and so on. The effect is definitely one of increased distance and detachment, which is quite appropriate. The air of unreality suggests, of course, the phony theatrical world of Esther and the fact that this scene is part of a role-playing routine in their turbulent and disintegrating love affair. Eugene's dialogue with his spiritual core at the end of Look Homeward, Angel, and the discourse between George Webber's spirit and his mirrored body at the conclusion of The Web and the Rock are similar examples of Wolfe's experimentation with point of view. Wolfe had greatly admired the ending of the "Ancient Mariner" poem in which he felt the supernatural and natural were superbly blended, the atmosphere so strongly created that the reader never thought to question.<sup>11</sup> The ending of Look Homeward, Angel is far more successful in its blend because the romantic aura, the entire trend of the book has prepared the reader to accept Eugene's conversation with his "dead" brother Ben who echoes the spiritual lesson that Eugene "Can't Go Home Again" and must look within him-



self (LHA, 520). The more objective, realistic atmosphere of The Web and the Rock, and the fact that the ending reads like an epilogue and not an extension of the novel, combine to make this conclusion a much less successful variation of point of view.

In The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again the increased emphasis on George and the other characters as representatives of mankind leads to an increase in the number and length of the epic and abstract passages, a trend noted in the chapters on diction and syntax. These passages appear both in the voice of the narrator and in the voice of George since the careful separation of the two is continued in You Can't Go Home Again, as well. Evidence the following remark by the narrator of the latter novel: "My only object is to set down here the truthful record of George Webber's life, and he, I feel quite sure, would be the last person in the world to wish me to suppress any chapter of it" (YCGHA, 350). Greater objectivity and philosophical truth may result from Wolfe's narrative distance in the Webber cycle, but other elements of style suffer from the increased detachment.

Characterization, as an element of overall form, was extremely important to Wolfe. In his article "What a Writer Reads," Wolfe says that it is vital for the characters in a story to be believable for "I could believe anything once the people in the thing were real and right."<sup>12</sup> Wolfe also speaks of certain figures so completely absorbed and understood by a novelist's consciousness that he can produce and recreate them at will. In a sense they command him because "he cannot, without a strong sense of unreality and unfitness, make these



figures do anything against or beyond their character." So it was, he says, with the character of Esther Jacobs (Jacks) whom he likens to Joyce's Leopold Bloom, Melville's Ahab and scores of Dickens' characters.<sup>13</sup>

Esther is undeniably a very real and complex character creation, as are all the members of the Gant family, and it can be demonstrated that Wolfe's rich characterizations are built up through the same stylistic techniques we have noted elsewhere. The chapter on syntax demonstrated Wolfe's use of dialogue to characterize. Mention was also made of the exaggerated larger-than-life quality of his characters, a quality characteristic of a child's perception but also of a continuing child-like belief in the valiance and grandeur of man. The dual perception so evident in Wolfe's pronounced use of paradox, and ability to entertain both antithetical elements at once, also show up in Wolfe's rich characterizations. The duality of Esther was discussed with reference to sexual imagery; in similar fashion the magnificent characterization of W.O. Gant, for example, shows a man of roaring energy, of great creativity, a proud, glorious, questing, God-like individual who is, nevertheless, also depicted as whining, petulant, martyred, selfish, hypocritical, tyrannical and corrupt. Repetition is another tendency of Wolfe's, noted earlier, that appears as a method of characterization. Distinctive characteristics of behavior, appearance, speech are "tagged" to characters and repeated frequently, a technique reminiscent of Dickens. In this way the transient characters, which abound in Wolfe's writing, are individualized and made as memorable, for example, as gouty, phlegmy Mr. Flood, "with his bulging and



bejowled stare of comic stupefaction" (OT&R, 62). Permanent characters illustrate the same technique in use: Eliza is inseparable from mention of her jet black hair, high forehead, Pentland nose, pursed mouth, pointing gesture and characteristic speech; Ben, from his scowl, flickering smile and jerk sideways of the head to address his dark, satiric angel. The list could go on, extending even to Eugene/George who repeatedly cranes his neck, lifts one foot sharply off the ground as if in pain, and claws or clutches at his throat. Some critics, such as Robert Penn Warren,<sup>14</sup> object to the tagging technique as an annoying and insulting jog to the memory. On the other hand, most people do have such characteristics, made noticeable by their habitual nature. The reiteration by Wolfe does, however, increase the sense of eccentricity of his characters and it is perhaps for this reason that the tagging technique becomes much less apparent in the Webber cycle, where Wolfe was more intent on typicality than individuality.

Brown makes the common observation about Wolfe's characters that they "were at once richly complicated individuals who attracted the realist in him and also typical figures, often indeed gigantic symbols of American life."<sup>15</sup> The statement is valid. As the earlier discussion of puns indicated, even many of the character names were chosen for their symbolic value, such as Eugene, Webber, Gant, Aunt Maw, and so on. While point of view in the Gant cycle has been attacked as being too subjective, that of the Webber cycle could well be regarded as too objective, resulting in characters who are too often so representative and symbolic that they are little else. For this reason, a critic like Clements is able to pigeon-hole the characters of You





Can't Go Home Again into rejection symbols: Aunt Mav, representing family ties; Merritt, the cannibalistic business ethic; Esther Jack, personal love that must be forfeited if it links man with twisted values; Lloyd McHarg, the false illusion of fame; Foxhall Edwards, the rejected father figure,<sup>16</sup> and so on. Because the narrator takes a stance so far above the characters, so must the reader. Looking down leads to feelings of superiority rather than to those of empathy and involvement. As a result, the vitality, the color, the individual grandeur of characters dwindles. As a blanket assertion, this statement would be erroneous, for characters such as Nebraska Crane and, of course, Esther do appear, but as an observation of a general trend to typicality and mediocrity in all facets of Wolfe's later language, I believe the generalization holds true.

The extension of imagery, as a stylistic mode of expression, to symbolism, as a structural element in the mold of expression, has been left last in this discussion of the unity of Wolfe's language and vision. Last, because more than any other element in Wolfe's style, the symbols embody his authorial vision and, with the help of underlying chronology, provide the most consistent form of structural unity in the four novels. The adjective "consistent" may distress those critics who find Wolfe's symbols shifting and confusing. They should keep in mind, first of all, Wolfe's dual awareness which is reflected in the paradoxical nature of his symbols. Secondly, Wolfe's symbols do grow, accruing new meanings and associations with each use. As Wolfe's vision grew and changed and yet remained unchanged, the eternal spiritual truth common to all mankind, so Wolfe's symbols are ever-changing



and yet changeless. Eliza of the Gant cycle may develop into Aunt Maw and Esther of the Webber cycle, the dichotomy of South and North may become that of Europe (in particular, Germany) and America, but an underlying unity of meaning prevails. It must be remembered, too, that the Oktoberfest, for example, which concludes The Web and the Rock is an event described in Wolfe's letters in 1928, and that the love affair which occupies so large a place in both The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again was over, for all intents and purposes, by 1930; in other words, that most of the seeds of Wolfe's philosophy and hence his symbols had been planted before the completion of Look Homeward, Angel and merely developed and branched through the course of the remaining novels. Wolfe does a remarkably good job of recapturing the naïve viewpoint of the inexperienced child and adolescent, but those critics who feel Wolfe's development literally coincided with that of his heroes are grossly in error.

The symbolic passage which functions as prologue to Look Homeward, Angel is worth quoting, both for its stylistic excellence and for the evidence it gives of Wolfe's symbolic development in this early phase of his writing career:

. . . a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces.

Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth.

Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?

O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek



the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?

O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again. (LHA, 1)

The passage begins with a fragment, a tag-end that is baffling because it is incomplete. Yet we feel if we could hear again, if we could only remember the first part of the sentence, we would have the key to the meaning. And that is the theme of the lost paradise: fallen man whose spiritual nature and vision is buried beneath physical drives and limitations, can have only tantalizing intuitions of the glory he has lost, ever-elusive, ever-frustrating, ever-inspiring. The varied repetition "of a stone, a leaf, a door" is a mulling over, the "of" implying that these were the components of the message, as they are components of Wolfe's philosophy in his novels. The order of the triad is fixed, whenever it appears. Chronologically, the three can be seen as ordered steps in the process of creation. First, the creation of the eternal, immutable, lifeless mountains and hills, like the hills that bound in Wolfe's Asheville home, and which he described as his unyielding masters, "beyond the necessity for growth and change."<sup>17</sup> Secondly, the leaf, as symbolic of natural creation, that lives and dies and lives again in cyclic fashion, the repetition giving a form of immortality. This is the philosophy of Ecclesiastes, which does not differentiate man and nature. Thirdly, there is the door which is as yet unfound but hopefully existent. The door is man-made; it belongs to a world of houses, towns and cities; it belongs to linear time and has a dual nature as both an end and a beginning: shut, it forms a confining prison; open, it leads to freedom, to the future,



to new lands and a new tomorrow. It is this forward-looking, hopeful orientation that living man must have. Death is closely related to the door image for each door shut and opened is, in a sense, a death and a rebirth. The proper orientation is not outward or into the past, but inward to man's essential nature and into the future.

The stone must also remind one of Wolfe's own father, who like W.O. Gant was a stonecutter. In creating Webber's father, Wolfe found it necessary to make him a mason -- necessary, because his father's profession had great significance for Wolfe. As he says in his "Defensio Libris" for Look Homeward, Angel: "a man's sculpture of life is his own, but the clay and the rock from which he shapes that sculpture are the clay and the rock of human experience."<sup>18</sup> The past has value as the raw material, the foundation on which to build, but man's vision must be progressive, looking ahead, not backward-looking, reminiscent and retrogressive. Wolfe's father sought the door to freedom through stone, and his symbolic hope was to wreak out his vision in the creation of an angel's head. He failed. He sold out his spiritual vision to commercialism and degradation as the sale of Gant's treasured angel for the grave of a prostitute, in Look Homeward, Angel, symbolically reveals. Wolfe sought creative outlet in the "leaves" of his notebooks, ledgers and novels. The complete articulation in language was the door he sought. In Look Homeward, Angel, Eugene is described as groping "for the doorless land of faery, that illimitable haunted country that opened somewhere below a leaf or a stone" (229). At this point he is mistakenly seeking romance and glory in the past, the "forgotten faces" referred to in the quoted prologue to Look Homeward,





Angel. By the end of the book, with the help of Ben, Eugene has realized: "And no leaf hangs for me in the forest; I shall lift no stone upon the hills; I shall find no door in any city. But in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul, I shall find the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter, the music strange as any ever sounded" (LHA, 521). Look Homeward, Angel can be seen then as a first phase of the "You can't go home again" theme; the philosophy is little different, although less obvious and structured, than the message of Wolfe's last novel, entitled You Can't Go Home Again.

In the letter to Mrs. Roberts, March 7, 1938, Wolfe explains the meaning which the symbolic phrase "You can't go home again" had accrued for him by the time of his death: "by that, I don't simply mean back to your home town -- I mean back to your childhood, back to the image of the father you have lost, back to the whole cosmos of your youth, and all its colors and associations, back to time and memory, back to romantic love, back to so many other things that were once the whole world to you."<sup>19</sup> Aswell elaborated on this summary statement in composing the italicized bridge for the last chapter of You Can't Go Home Again. The home and the direction one should take is clearly formulated in the latter novel, in which Wolfe says of George:

Ended now for him, with the sharp and clean finality of the closing of a door, was the time when his dark roots, like those of a pot-bound plant, could be left to feed upon their own substance and nourish their own little self-absorbed designs. Henceforth they must spread outward -- away from the hidden, secret, and unfathomed past that holds man's spirit prisoner -- outward, outward toward the rich and life-giving soil of a new freedom in the wide world of all humanity. And there came to him a vision of man's true home, beyond the ominous and cloud-engulfed horizon of the here and now, in the green and still-virgin meadows of the future. (YCGHA, 704)



The proper "home" of Look Homeward, Angel has not really changed from Eugene's discovery but has merely grown richer and more explicit.

The second paragraph of the prose poem prologue to Look Homeward, Angel has three movements. First, the idea of being exiled, naked and alone. The reference is to man's initial fall and exile from paradise. Secondly, we are given the image of the unborn child as a stranger imprisoned within the dark womb of the mother. Finally, birth is seen as a mere transfer from one dark prison to another, in which communication between strangers is still impossible. The entire conception is very like the pessimistic philosophy of Ecclesiastes 5:15 "As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came."

Paragraph three continues the idea of the lonely stranger of this earth with a series of four questions to which the apparent rhetorical answer would be "None of us." However, by the end of Look Homeward Angel, Eugene has come to some knowledge of his brother and of his father, and has taken the first step toward freedom. Wolfe never does falter in his conviction, however, that man's state is a lonely one. Ultimately, this loneliness and suffering is the basis he finds for belief in the commonality and brotherhood of mankind. "God's Lonely Man," published in the posthumous collection, The Hills Beyond, speaks of Christ's chronicle of love in the New Testament, love that brings unity and brotherhood, and Wolfe says: "And now I know that though the way and meaning of Christ's life is a far, far better way and meaning than my own, yet I can never make it mine . . . For I have found the constant, ever-lasting weather of man's life to be, not love but



loneliness" (HB, 196). It is his old comrade loneliness who will bring to him again "the old invincible strength, the deathless hope, the triumphant joy and confidence that will storm the earth again" (HB, 197).

Paragraph four of the prose poem bewails the lost earth as "this most weary unbright cinder" among bright stars. As was pointed out in the opening pages of this thesis, the idea here is again that of the lost paradise, connecting to the quotation from the old geography book that the earth was once a white-hot sphere like the sun. "Unbright -- bright" emphasizes the extent of the fall to a complete negation. "Cinder" suggests the blackness, the hardness, the waste by-product of a burning hell perhaps. The lonely "o" sound predominates in the latter half of the prologue, as it repeats the quest identified in the opening lines. "Where? When?" spatially and temporally, does the answer lie?

The last paragraph is the mournful, wistful, lyrical sentence so often repeated by Wolfe: "O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again." The wind, as a conventional romantic image, could refer to God grieving lost man, now a ghost of his former glory. However, Wolfe's religion is basically one of the self, and the wind can be more accurately interpreted as the spiritual side of man grieving its loss. In this sense "the ghost" represents pre-existence and all the glory of the past. Dead brother Ben returned in Look Homeward, Angel denies, however, that he is a ghost and Eugene queries "which of us is the ghost, I wonder?" (516) Similarly, Wolfe writes to Aline Bernstein, "I seem to be the phantom in a world of people; or the only



person in a world of phantoms -- it's all the same."<sup>20</sup> The effect of loneliness, of separation, of unreality and unnaturalness is the same either way. Involved here is the romantic conception of the physical world as shadowy, spectral and unreal while the spiritual world is the intangible yet true world of reality. While the ghost suggests eternal death, the image of the angel represents eternal life, the spiritual living side of hope and aspiration. I believe Wolfe is saying that man is ghost or angel -- albeit a fallen angel -- depending on his orientation to the past or to the future. That grief for the past is a senseless waste of spirit (creativity), Eugene learns from the death of his brother Ben which he is able to accept as a release to new life, a rebirth. The past is a foundation but it has no capacity for growth; those things which represent obsession with the past such as Eliza and the South, or anything that represents sterility and non-creativity like Eugene's homosexual friend Starwick, the sterile June-January relationship with Esther/Aline, the unchanging fatalistic philosophy of Foxhall Edwards/Maxwell Perkins, all these things must be left behind; utilized as a part of experience, but surpassed.

The prologue to Of Time and the River is very similar in vision and language to that of Look Homeward, 'Angel. Many of the same symbols appear along with predictable developments. The "stranger" of Look Homeward, Angel has become the "wanderer," the hungry youth of the subtitle to Of Time and the River. Also prominent is the theme of the recurrent seasons and of the quest for a father. While the prologue is too long to quote, one paragraph will illustrate the symbolic nature of the wording, the concision and suggestiveness: "The tarantula





is crawling through the rotted oak, the adder lisps against the breast, cups fall : but the earth will endure forever. The flower of love is living in the wilderness, and the elmroot threads the bones of buried lovers" (OT&R, 2). While the opening of Look Homeward, Angel bemoaned the waste and loss, Of Time and the River can begin with the knowledge gained by Eugene: that from the horror of death comes life. The time question which Wolfe said particularly concerned him during the composition of Of Time and the River is worked out in the symbols of this passage. Present time is embodied in the adder that "lisps," the cups that "fall," the elmroot that "threads." The tarantula, symbolic of eternal pain and death, "is crawling," while the contrasting flower of eternal love "is living," the progressives suggesting the continuity of present into future, a continuity which results in a cyclic form of immortality, similar to but distinct from the immutability of the earth that endures forever. The past tense belongs to the "rotted" oak and the "buried" lovers which nevertheless influence the present through the stimulation (literally, fertilization) they provide for new growth. The prologue to Of Time and the River ends with an apostrophe to Immortal Love which was not absent from man's loneliness (2). The emphasis on love in the prologue to the second novel is echoed in Eugene's love for Ann and finally in his discovery of Esther, the epiphany concluding Of Time and the River.

The italicized passages beginning The Web and the Rock and You Can't Go Home Again are much briefer and more prosaic, nor is it clear whether they were Wolfe's deliberate composition and choice or simply passages selected by Aswell in order to continue the format



of the first two books. The excerpt fronting The Web and the Rock speaks of the desire to utter the unutterable and thus triumph over death. The ending of the book answers this desire by having George accept the limitations of his body. While the two fit together, neither opening nor ending has any particular relevance to the remainder of the book. The prologue to You Can't Go Home Again establishes the image of man's life as a tiny valiant flame in darkness, and is the most positively oriented of the four prologues. The idea is not a new one by any means, having appeared throughout Wolfe's work in varying forms as well as almost verbatim in a letter, September 25, 1926 to Aline Bernstein with reference to the defeat of Dempsey, and again on page 585 of The Web and the Rock. The prologues of the Webber cycle, probably selected by Aswell, in no way approach the calibre of those written for Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River. The latter two, however, establish the major symbols that will act as structural links throughout the four novels. Wolfe's symbols are links in the sense of an underlying continuous chain, not as mere poetic inserts and bridges as some critics would imply. H.S. Canby says, for example, that Wolfe writes autobiography with a poetic accompaniment,<sup>21</sup> and Warren speaks of an oscillation between the poetic and the prosaic,<sup>22</sup> both men suggesting a separation. Wolfe's symbols, although more concentrated in the poetic passages, can be shown to be much more pervasive and fused with his vision than is commonly asserted.

Several other connected images merit mention. Wolfe had intended to call his second novel "The October Fair," and the symbol of October occurs frequently. It is likened, for example, to present day



America since both are seen as "weary with harvest, potent with every fruit and ore, the immeasurable richness embrowned with autumn, rank, crude, unharnessed, careless of scars or beauty, everlasting and magnificent. . . ." <sup>23</sup> As representative of the earth-mother, the ripe, the rich, the golden, the mature -- mythic figures such as Demeter and Helen, as well as Esther, become associated with the symbol. October is also regarded by Wolfe as a time of return, and as such, Wolfe must ultimately reject autumn / October, turning instead to the future, the growth and vitality, the new life of spring / April. This is the decisive step that America must take as well. Like Gant, America has allowed her spiritual vision to be corrupted, as evidenced by the Depression and the American tragedy in general. The country reaped what it had sown. But from the shambles Wolfe could see new life emerging, the promise of America.

The symbols of the web and the rock are in many ways simply extensions of the leaf and the stone. The web is any structure spun by man as he lives and grows. It connotes great complexity. Negatively oriented it can become a cancerous, life-devouring cell growth, a tangle, a jungle, a snare, a prison. This negative spectrum seems often to be associated with women, perhaps in accordance with the passage in Ecclesiastes 7:26 "And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands." As was pointed out in the discussion of sexual imagery in Chapter IV, Wolfe appears to link the maternal, the sexual, with the physical side of man's nature, the side which he shares with the natural, the primitive, the bestial. However, the web has a positive side, as well. George writes to his



editor Foxhall Edwards (Wolfe to Perkins) that, "Just as you are the rock of life, I am the web; just as you are Time's granite, so, I think, am I Time's plant. My life, more than that of anyone I know, has taken on the form of growth" (YCGHA, 739), having escaped its narrow roots of Time and Memory. The web as representative of growth and change is a positive symbol.

The rock, like the stone, represents permanence and immutability. It is strong and resistant to impression, and consequently may appear hard and impersonal and indifferent. The fatalism of Ecclesiastes, which Wolfe accepts cosmically but rejects for Man-Alive, is the philosophy of the rock, lifeless in itself but nevertheless the rock of life, in the sense that it is a foundation on which to build. The search for a father is closely tied to the rock symbol. In The Story of a Novel Wolfe defines this as a search for "not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united" (38). In "No Door" Wolfe speaks of a father who provides "the tremendous structure of your life that will shape all lost and broken things on earth again into a golden pattern of exultancy and joy" (Scribner's Magazine, 47), just as W.O. Gant, for all his rant and debauchery, provided order and pattern and warmth for his family. Wolfe had been separated from his own father at an early age when his mother left the family home to establish a boarding house. Wolfe makes this separation figure largely in the early life of both his heroes, and undoubtedly his own search for an external strength and order was





influenced by this experience. Maxwell Perkins is frequently referred to by Wolfe as his spiritual father and this is his role also as Foxhall Edwards in Wolfe's fictional work. The rock and father symbols change in Wolfe's later period only to the extent that Wolfe ceases to look externally, developing the discovery of Eugene Gant in Look Homeward, Angel that within each man lies the spiritual vision, the pattern for his life and work. Wolfe's Purdue Speech concludes with an assertion that he has now learned to be reliant on his own strength, realizing that every man must be founded on his own rock (PS, 78).

As was earlier pointed out, W.O. and Eliza Gant are established respectively in the first two chapters of Look Homeward, Angel, and the conflict between their natures determines the shape of the novel as well as the environment in which the hero will develop. The maternal and paternal, the feminine and masculine, are without a doubt the most comprehensive symbols Wolfe uses, practically all of his more minor symbols lining up on one side or the other. The two sides of his own heritage come to typify the dichotomy in the heart of every man. In Wolfe's own words:

In every man there are two hemispheres of light and dark; two worlds discrete, two countries of his soul's adventure. And one of these is the dark land, the other half of his heart's home, the unvisited domain of his father's earth.

And this is the land he knows best. It is the earth unvisited -- and it is his, as nothing he has seen can ever be. It is the world intangible that he has never touched -- yet more his own than something he has owned forever. It is the great world of his mind, his heart, his spirit, built there in his imagination, shaped by wonder and unclouded by the obscuring flaws of accident and actuality, the proud, unknown earth of the lost, the found, the never-here, the ever-real America, unsullied, true, essential, built there in the brain, and shaped to glory by the proud and flaming vision of a child. (W&R, 140)



Around the maternal/feminine side, then, are clustered the images of ancestry, the hills, the past, the South, Germany, tradition, darkness, primitivism, ritual, superstition, mystery, shadows and ghosts, death, the eternal earth, nature, October/autumn, physicality, fecundity, sensuality, and so on. If this side of one's nature becomes an escape rather than a foundation for growth, then such connotations as the prison, snare, sentimentality, bigotry, bestiality, cruelty and madness become associated. The paternal/masculine side, as the previous quotation would indicate, clusters symbols of light, mind, heart, spirit, imagination, pride, true reality, glory, fire, energy, order, strength, growth and change, freedom, life, April/spring, new lands, shining city, the North, the true America, vision. Therefore, although Wolfe's images grow to symbols, and his symbols grow and develop throughout his novels, still there is an underlying unity and immutability in Wolfe's language just as there is in his vision. In more philosophical terms, the dark side of man's heart accepts the stern realism of Ecclesiastes while the light, the spiritual side, valiantly affirms the romantic vision. Wolfe differs from most romantics, however, in his insistence that vision be not a recollection but a looking ahead to the ever-elusive future.

To see Wolfe as a composite of co-existing realism and romanticism is to place him most meaningfully in terms of literary tradition and influence. Wolfe had a habit of writing into his notebooks, as well as his novels, lists of books he had read, writers he had enjoyed, lines he had memorized. In "What a Writer Reads," for example, Wolfe mentioned not only poetry but books by Tolstoy, Fielding,



Melville and Joyce, non-fiction books like Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy as well as history books and those filled with interesting facts and figures such as The World Almanac.<sup>24</sup> Such references have sent far too many scholars scurrying to determine "influence." Certainly, cognizance should be taken of sources, but the tendency has been to liken Wolfe to another writer in vague generalities without ever coming to specific terms with Wolfe's language and vision. I have attempted to take the reverse approach as the more meaningful one, proceeding from analysis to synthesis. In the process, similarities with other writers, so frequently cited by critics, have undeniably emerged:

Wolfe's rhetoric, poetic tendency, positive orientation, Americanism, epic approach, vitalism, sustained intensity, lack of subordination and other qualities are no doubt to be found in the verse of Walt Whitman, whose poem, "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night," provided the title page motto for Wolfe's From Death to Morning collection. Like Melville is Wolfe's Biblical language, cognizance of evil, of the disparity between absolute and actual, of man's limitations and his valiant struggle. Wolfe is a writer from the South as are Faulkner and Poe, and his romantic sensibility and linguistic extravagance could be likened to theirs. I have said that Wolfe's dedication to his vocation could be compared with Milton's, and certainly the lines drawn from "Lycidas" and other poems by Milton, alluded to previously, would indicate a good knowledge of the English master-poet. Wolfe could, and has been, compared to Proust for his preoccupation with time, to Dreiser for his cataloguing and listing, to Sinclair Lewis for his realistic picture of a small town. Joyce has been a



favorite influence to cite in terms of themes such as the portrait of the young artist, the search for a spiritual father, the techniques like the stream-of-consciousness, the poetic fragment, the epiphanic moment, compounded and inverted words, adjectival pile-ups and so on. Wolfe added fuel to this fire by making specific reference to the influence of Joyce in The Story of a Novel. He said: "the book that I was writing [OT&R] was much influenced, I believe, by his own book [Ulysses], and yet the powerful energy and fire of my own youth played over and, I think, possessed it all" (8-9). Curiously enough, Wolfe wrote in a letter to his friend Henry Volkening that Joyce was not a writer of great natural ability in the sense of fluency and ease but that he had "an integrity of spirit, a will, and a power to work . . . the thing that makes a man do more than his best, exhaust his ultimate resources,"<sup>25</sup> and it was this quality that Wolfe admired in Joyce above all.

If I were asked to cite the writer having the greatest probable influence on Wolfe, I would name Coleridge, for reasons substantiated broadly in Wolfe's work. In his Paris notebook Wolfe says that Coleridge "'is not one of the great English poets. He is The Poet.'"<sup>26</sup> Wolfe also wrote to Aline Bernstein that he was considering the title "Alone, Alone" for the manuscript tentatively entitled "O Lost," and which later became Look Homeward, Angel. "Alone, Alone," he stated was drawn from the passage in his favorite poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."<sup>27</sup> Also in a letter to Aline is Wolfe's description of a horrible time he had gone through; the circumstances, whether consciously or unconsciously, are those of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Wolfe says it was a time when:





. . . my sleep was peopled with logical monsters; when I dreamed, and knew that I dreamed with my mind rationally astride its own insanity. Then I dreamed most frequently of voyages; in a dark but visible universe, under a light that never fell on land or ocean, I crossed haunted and desolate seas, the solitary passenger of spectral ships; and there was always the far sound of horns blowing under water, and on the American shore, no matter how far, the plain but ghostly voices of the friends I had had, and the foes; rising forever, with its whole spectral and noiseless carnival of sound and movement, was New York, like a bodiless phantom, and my unknown home, which I never had, but whose outlines were perfectly familiar to me; and thus I passed without lapse of time through all the horrible vitality of this strange world, all tumult but the ghost of sound, all forms and faces but the ghost of people, near enough to touch, but illimitably remote, until returning in my agony from this place I had sought voyaging again upon the haunted sea, under the unearthly light, I awoke with my hand upon my throat, to cry "I have voyaged enough. I will go no more."<sup>28</sup>

Like Coleridge are the symbols of the voyage by ship, the confusion of dream and reality, the darkness and unearthly light, the desolation and loneliness, the far sound of the horn and other mystic noises, the timelessness, the spectral voices and companions, the agony and suffering. What emerges is a description of Wolfe's first cycle of self-conscious wandering, suffering and uncertainty that make up Look Homeward, Angel, Of Time and the River and parts of the later novels. We may think of Wolfe's agonized outpouring of his experiences, as described in The Story of a Novel, which he, himself, compared to the penance of the mariner (41-42). Similarly, the mariner was compelled to tell his story to those in need of its lesson while one of Wolfe's favorite expressions was: "I have a thing to tell you." At university Wolfe had studied Coleridge under Professor Lowes. Earlier mention was made of the fact that his habit of carrying a notebook was probably derived from this practice of Coleridge's. In addition, Wolfe chose to write an eighty page essay entitled: "The Development of the



Supernatural in Coleridge," in which he noted the following points: the ability of Coleridge's imagination to subconsciously fuse material which would then return under present stimulus; his tendency to occupy a dream world; his extravagant phrasing and repetition which stressed what was important to him; his fondness for metaphysics and for poetry; his superb use of the supernatural in combination with the natural; his subtle handling of ghosts; his belief in the union of the old and the new, the past and the present, the one and the many, unity in change; the hope that he might be the one for whom the veil of the senses would be rent, the mysteries of life laid bare and so he wrestled incessantly with the Angel of the Vision.<sup>29</sup> I have sketched the similarities with Coleridge because I feel this is an area that merits indepth study, a study which I can only suggest in this thesis.

Certainly Wolfe made no attempt to conceal or to deny influence. To Aline Bernstein he wrote: "You used to tell me that 'I talked like a book', and you were right . . . I think it is true that books and poetry have influenced my life . . . [I was] an honest and excited child, full of books and poetry, who wanted beauty and heroism and glory from life. I still want them."<sup>30</sup> However, just as Wolfe felt that the power and energy of his own vision and language encompassed any influence of Joyce so the reader must feel, even with Coleridge, that Wolfe's work is ultimately his own. Muller makes a rational summation of Wolfe's reading, saying: "It helped to form and fill his mind; it did not directly shape his art. His taste is notable chiefly for its catholicity . . . The few masters he could not enjoy were apparently those whose art was more exquisite than robust; he



mentions that he was unable to finish a single novel by James or Howells."<sup>31</sup>

The schools of James and Howells were, unfortunately for Wolfe, the literary and critical vogue of the time and place into which he was born. How much effect had early twentieth century America on Wolfe's writing? Considerable. Asheville, N.C., the Altamont and Libya Hill of his novels, was poised between north and south, also having a good cross-section of American life by virtue of being a health resort with a large transient population. This fact, plus the southern-northern split of Wolfe's personal ancestry made the dual awareness and conflict in his work inevitable. For these same reasons Wolfe could feel that his life was representative of all Americans, so that the biographical heritage broadened to the dichotomy of male and female principles earlier discussed. In addition, Wolfe was also poised between the romanticism of the nineteenth century and the growing realism of the twentieth. This dual perspective is fundamental to the analysis given of Wolfe's vision and language. Pre-war, war-time, boom-time, and depression America are very much a part of Wolfe's novels, as quoted excerpts throughout this thesis have hopefully demonstrated. The growth and change in Wolfe's vision and language is dependent on all these factors as they impinged on his ultra-sensitive nature. To be more specific, the critics of Wolfe's day, supporters as most of them were of the Jamesian formalist school and of literature of increasing realism and/or naturalism, predictably rebuked Wolfe for his lack of conventional form, his subjectivity, his romantic idealism, his extravagant expression -- in short, for most of the essential



qualities of his early work. Qualified praise and sizeable sales also accompanied Wolfe's novels, but the criticism stung, and was certainly one factor in determining the direction Wolfe's development would take. The influence of Wolfe's belief that his life represented that of all Americans has already been noted in the impetus it gave to abstraction, to generalization, to epic pronouncements and to symbolic characterization. Wolfe's novels also show a development from a predominantly romantic mode of thought and expression to a more realistic, objective, controlled, conventional, and unfortunately, often mediocre perception and product. The romantic vision, resolutely oriented to the future, nevertheless persisted, embodied largely in the symbols Wolfe used throughout his work. Post-war and depression America with its irrational, hysterical boom of false values followed by a resounding crash and consequent suffering, fostered the examination of spiritual values, of sociological and philosophical concerns, and these, too, are increasingly reflected in Wolfe's later writing, culminating in the enunciation of belief, albeit provisional, that concludes You Can't Go Home Again. Wolfe had found the audience for whom he had been writing. Equipped with a more clearly formulated philosophy, he addressed himself to his task and to his audience, "for he had a thing to tell them."

Wolfe says in the conclusion of The Story of a Novel that the artist's task "is one whose physical proportions are vaster and more difficult here than in any other nation on the earth . . . It is not merely that he must make somehow a new tradition for himself, derived from his own life and from the enormous space and energy of





American life, the structure of his own design; . . . it is even more than this, that the labor of a complete and whole articulation, the discovery of an entire universe and of a complete language, is the task that lies before him" (92). I believe Wolfe did create his own tradition and his own design. He did labor to achieve the complete language. The development that his vision and language took was predictable and understandable, if regrettable, for it was the doubt, the quest, the exuberance, the lyrical intensity that made Thomas Wolfe unique. For a man whose vision and language were so utterly one, it was inevitable that as his vision grew more concise and ordered and clear in formulation, so must his language. Paradoxically, for many readers, the visionary gain must seem a linguistic and literary loss.



## ABBREVIATIONS

FDTM	<u>From Death to Morning</u> (New York, 1935).
HB	<u>The Hills Beyond</u> (New York, 1941).
HCL	Harvard Library Collection.
LHA	<u>Look Homeward, Angel</u> (New York, 1929).
OT&R	<u>Of Time and the River</u> (New York, 1935).
PN	Pocket Notebook. There are thirty-five notebooks in the Wisdom Collection at Harvard.
PS	<u>Thomas Wolfe's Purdue Speech</u> (Purdue University Studies, 1964 [1937]).
SN	<u>The Story of a Novel</u> (New York, 1936).
W&R	<u>The Web and the Rock</u> (New York, 1939).
YCGHA	<u>You Can't Go Home Again</u> (New York, 1940).



## FOOTNOTES

### CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Johnson, Of Time and Thomas Wolfe, 13.

<sup>2</sup>Wolfe, The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe, eds. Kennedy and Reeves, 47.

<sup>3</sup>HCL 46AM-13, #33, November 17-29, 1928.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., #10, September 27, 1926.

<sup>5</sup>The Well-tempered Critic, 37.

<sup>6</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-e).

<sup>7</sup>The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe, Introduction, xv. In the appendix is a xerox copy of a page from Wolfe's PN #12.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., Introduction, xxiii.

<sup>9</sup>HCL 46AM-11, January 12, 1929.

<sup>10</sup>Complete Poems and Major Prose, 694.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Wolfe's Purdue Speech, Introduction, 10-11.

<sup>12</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (69), PN #12, p.22.

<sup>13</sup>"A Note on Thomas Wolfe," The Hills Beyond, 369

<sup>14</sup>John Skally Terry, "Wolfe and Perkins," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 53.



CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>Hungry Gulliver, 22.

<sup>2</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (26), 259-260.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 421.

<sup>4</sup>"Death the Proud Brother," FDTM, 45.

<sup>5</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-h).

<sup>6</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (69), PN #6.

<sup>7</sup>"Discovery of Brotherhood," 211-212.

<sup>8</sup>The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe, eds. Kennedy and Reeves, 991-92.

<sup>9</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (26), 483.

CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>The Study of Style, 165.

<sup>2</sup>Style and Proportion: The Language of Prose and Poetry, 1-5.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>4</sup>Maxwell Perkins, "Scribner's and Tom Wolfe," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 61.

<sup>5</sup>HCL 46Am-13, #44 letters unsent. In the appendix a xerox copy of this passage appears as an example of Wolfe's sprawling handwriting.

<sup>6</sup>"The Face of the War," FDTM, 72-73.

<sup>7</sup>"Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel as a Novel of Development," Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism, 202.





<sup>8</sup>"The Dark, Ruined Helen of his Blood," Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism, 27.

<sup>9</sup>LTM, ed. Terry, March 31, 1923, 47.

<sup>10</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (69).

<sup>11</sup>HCL 46AM-13, October 28, 1926.

<sup>12</sup>A History of English Prose Rhythm, 335.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 463.

#### CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>"No Door," FDTM, 5.

<sup>2</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-x).

<sup>3</sup>HCL 46Am-7 (69), PN #3.

<sup>4</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (26), 522.

<sup>5</sup>"No Door," Scribner's Magazine, 47.

<sup>6</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (69).

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Wolfe, 63.

<sup>8</sup>HCL 46AM-13, August 1928.

<sup>9</sup>The Well-tempered Critic, 21.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>11</sup>On Native Grounds, 468.

<sup>12</sup>"Wolfe's Harvard Years," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 22.



- <sup>13</sup>Volkening, "Penance No More," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 47.
- <sup>14</sup>HCL 46AM-13, March 1931.
- <sup>15</sup>DeVoto, "Genius Is Not Enough," 330.
- <sup>16</sup>"The Wolfe at the Door," 458.
- <sup>17</sup>HCL 46AM-13, October 14, 1926.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid., October 25, 1926.
- <sup>19</sup>"The Wolfe at the Door," 458.
- <sup>20</sup>"Rhetoric in Southern Writing," 80, my italics.
- <sup>21</sup>The Short Novels of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Holman, 176.
- <sup>22</sup>HCL 46AM-9 (1-3).
- <sup>23</sup>HCL 46AM-13, September 25, 1926.
- <sup>24</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (69).
- <sup>25</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-g).
- <sup>26</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-p).
- <sup>27</sup>HCL 46AM-13, November 13, 1926.
- <sup>28</sup>"Wolfe at the Door," 457.
- <sup>29</sup>HCL 46AM-13, August 1928.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid., March 1931.
- <sup>31</sup>"The Dark Ruined Helen of His Blood," Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism, 29.
- <sup>32</sup>"The Vitalist Trend," 308.



<sup>33</sup>"Why You Can't Go Home Again," 304.

<sup>34</sup>"No Door," Scribner's Magazine, 47.

<sup>35</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (26), 270-71.

<sup>36</sup>"Why You Can't Go Home Again," 310.

<sup>37</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-x).

<sup>38</sup>HCL 46AM-13, #30.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, August 25, 1929.

## CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (69), 153.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, PN #31.

<sup>3</sup>HCL 46AM-13, November 13, 1926.

<sup>4</sup>HCL 46AM-11, February 10, 1924.

<sup>5</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (69), PN #28.

<sup>6</sup>HCL 46AM-8 (9), 63.

<sup>7</sup>"Time as Unity in Thomas Wolfè," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe,  
245.

<sup>8</sup>HCL 46AM-11, #2 from Cambridge.

<sup>9</sup>"Lycidas," 125, L193.

<sup>10</sup>Aswell, "Note," HB., 371.

<sup>11</sup>HCL 46AM-8 (9).



- <sup>12</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-p).
- <sup>13</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-j).
- <sup>14</sup>"The Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 125-126.
- <sup>15</sup>"Realist and Symbolist," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 208.
- <sup>16</sup>"Symbolic Patterns in You Can't Go Home Again," 286-296.
- <sup>17</sup>"Notes from the European Tour, 1924-25," Kennedy and Reeves, 35.
- <sup>18</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-c).
- <sup>19</sup>HCL 46AM-11, March 7, 1938.
- <sup>20</sup>HCL 46AM-13, September 25, 1926.
- <sup>21</sup>"The River of Youth," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 137.
- <sup>22</sup>"The Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 130.
- <sup>23</sup>"No Door," Scribner's Magazine, 48.
- <sup>24</sup>HCL 46AM-7 (70-p).
- <sup>25</sup>Volkening, "Penance No More," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 46.
- <sup>26</sup>Brown, "Realist and Symbolist," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, 220.
- <sup>27</sup>HCL 46AM-13, undated letter.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid., August 22, 1926.
- <sup>29</sup>HCL 46AM-8 (9), the ideas are taken from throughout the essay, the last thought concerning the Angel of the Vision from pages 81-82.
- <sup>30</sup>HCL 46AM-13, June 7, 1928.
- <sup>31</sup>Thomas Wolfe, 30.





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[Harper & Brothers, 1939].

\_\_\_\_\_. You Can't Go Home Again. New York: The Sun Dial Press,  
1942 [Harper & Brothers, 1940].

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of Thomas Wolfe, Harvard University.

#### 46AM-7(16)

The Return of Buck Gavin . . .

[Chapel Hill, 1919?] 29 l.

Three typescripts, all incomplete, all variants, one with re-  
visions in author's hand.

#### 46AM-7

[Niggertown. A play in ten scenes . . .]

[Cambridge, Mass., 1923] Ca. 320 l., incomplete.

Produced and afterwards known as Welcome To Our City.

2 or more early typescripts, including duplicate copies, variants  
and intermediate typed drafts under revision.

#### 46AM-7(25)

[Autobiographical sketch in preparation for Look Homeward, Angel]

[Europe? 1926] 89 l. plus 135p.

#### 46AM-7(26)

[O Lost, Deleted passages]

[New York? 1928?] 97 l.

Typescript with author's pencilled revisions, of some (not all)  
passages deleted before publication as Look Homeward, Angel.

#### 46AM-7(37)

[The Web of Earth]

[New York, 1932]



Manuscript drafts in some confusion of the short novel published in Scribner's Magazine, July 1932 and later included in From Death to Morning. Three or more typescripts are there including variant versions, some with extensive revisions in the author's hand.

46AM-7(46)

[Of Time and the River; unpublished passages]  
[New York, 1930? - 1934] ca. 3000 l.

46AM-7(56)

[The Web and the Rock]  
[V.P., 1931? - 1937?] ca. 3500 l.  
Typed drafts, including variant versions and duplicates, some with extensive revisions in the author's hand, also with notations by Wolfe and by Aswell.

46AM-7(59)

[You Can't Go Home Again]  
[New York, ca. 1936-1937?] ca. 2500 l.

Typed drafts, including variant versions and duplicates, some with extensive revisions in the author's hand, also with notations by Wolfe and by Aswell.

46AM-7(65)

[Passages marked as rejected by Edward C. Aswell]  
[V.P., 1930? - 1937?] ca. 1000 l.  
81 unpublished passages, 4 in manuscript and the remainder typed, bearing pencilled notations by Edward C. Aswell as having been specifically rejected in the editing of the posthumous books. Most of this material is duplicated elsewhere in literary mss.

46AM-7(69)

[34 pocket notebooks, 1925? - 1937?]  
Manuscripts of random notes of literary or purely casual interest.

46AM-7(70-dd)

Some work-charts (daily record of hours of work) 10 l.

46AM-7(70-e)

"Defensio Libris"  
- a note to precede Look Homeward, Angel, differing from the one actually used.

46AM-7(70-f)

Wolfe's Application for Guggenheim Fellowship dated Dec. 16, 1929. Contains statement of his past work and present plans. 21 l.



46AM-7(70-g)

A Statement about Look Homeward, Angel, and its critics. 1929-1930? 29 1.

46AM-7(70-h)

Review of A Farewell to Arms (unpublished) 1929-1930? 2 1.

46AM-7(70-j)

A Note on Esther Jacobs (Esther Jack) 22p. 1931? (with an early draft of "The Looking Glass" on the reverse, cf. W&R, Chap. 50).

46AM-7(70-0)

"What a Writer Reads"

Published in the Bookbuyer, Scribner's house organ, Dec. 1935; typescript 4 1.

46AM-7(70-q)

"Self-portrait"

Written for Portrait and Self-portraits, ed. by George Schreiber. 1936? 14 1 two carbon typescripts.

46AM-7(70-u)

"To the Reader," 1937. 4 1.

46AM-7(70-x)

Wolfe as Poet: fragments of verse, some serious but most doggerel. 1925-? ca. 100 1. Practically all in manuscript only.

46AM-7(70-z)

Wolfe as Artist.

46AM-8(9)

"The Supernatural in the poetry and philosophy of Coleridge; report for English 24."

Typescript, incomplete, 1920-21 for Prof. Lowes.

46AM-8(11)

Paper on Robert Greene marked by Prof. Lowe.

46AM-8(13)

"The development of the supernatural in the plays of William Shakespeare," typescript.





## 46AM-9(1-3)

Collection of memorabilia including photographs and drawings of Wolfe, his family and friends, x-ray negatives, newspaper stories, promotional material for his books.

## 46AM-10

Bernstein, Aline (Frankau), 1881-  
[Three manuscripts given to Wolfe]  
[New York? 1932] 53 1.

## 46AM-11

[Letters to Mrs. J.M. Roberts]  
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## 46AM-12(3)

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Vault: Restricted: Not to be Consulted.

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Memo -

Get up at 8 o'clock -  
 Cook / Alice - call present  
 4 of paper of letters  
 1 changed by letter

Beautiful and Pretty  
 for children can not  
 be governed or  
 judged by the standard,  
 of Capricious and  
 16 years old boys  
 and girls

To show the beautiful  
 instead of the ugly  
 life "to show what  
 it is capable of doing with  
 things that are ugly"  
 that is in itself is beautiful  
 beautiful with a change  
 no doubt it is 7 days



Tamara I will be thirty years old. When I met you 19 years ago. My dear girl is gone; the  
figure of the boy I was is  
gone, I am a poor old heavy  
figure of a man, and getting old, the  
I met you I was penniless and  
alone and filled with a great  
vision of the work I should  
do, the same  
I am penniless  
at now the name of  
alone again, I am  
has been forgotten, I am  
was old, and really blind



## WOLFE'S "POEM" FOR ALINE

(appearing in folder #34 of the letters to Aline)

Who only has seen a star  
 Never has known it.  
 So near to the eye, but far --  
 Too far to own it.  
 Who made us stars has given  
 Only the seeing --  
 Only the sight of heaven  
 Far from our being  
 Only the frustrate brain  
     The loaded heart,  
 Only the toil, the pain,  
     The fruitless part.  
 Only the flaming wish,  
     And breath to fan it.  
 A spirit too great for the flesh,  
 And too small for a planet  
 Too great for its little cage,  
 Too small for a star,  
 The grand heart beats hope into cinders, youth  
     into age.

    Waging vain war  
 Searching till it goes blind  
     The barren quarries;  
 Eating the Earth to find  
     What a Star is.

We who are men are greater than men  
     And less than our spirit,  
     Climbing half-heavenward, falling to  
         earth again.  
 We starve in the jungle and die  
     in the plain  
 Seeing heaven, but too weak to near it.

If Starmaker made the man,  
     He made him small;  
     Puny in reach and span  
     Thirsting for all.  
     Little of skull and bone,  
     An exile, a stranger, alone,  
     With a vision too great for him  
     And wisdom too late for him,  
     And the bed that's in wait for him  
         Under a stone.  
     -- That it [?] bell,  
         Not that he fell;





But that, like a god half arisen,  
He can look upon stars from his prison  
And find no help for his pain  
But death in the jungle, the wind and  
the rain.

Who only has seen a star  
Never has known it.  
All that I know of a certain star  
Is -- it is far.  
I do not own it.

(End)















**B29949**